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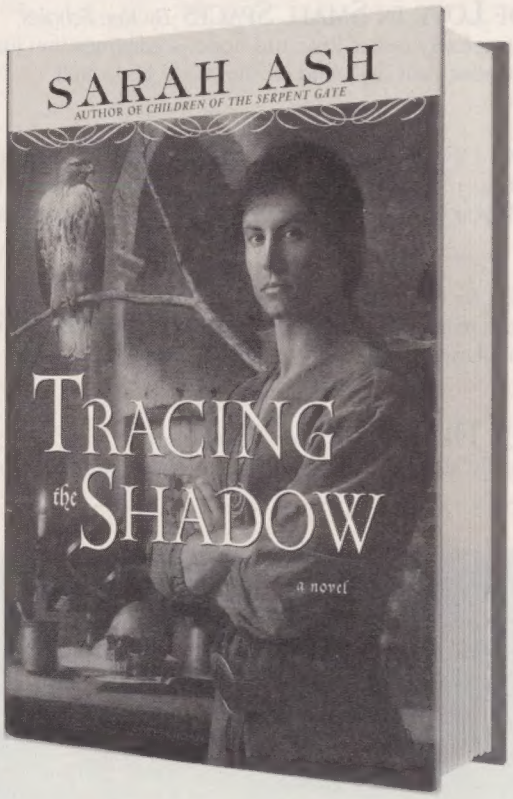

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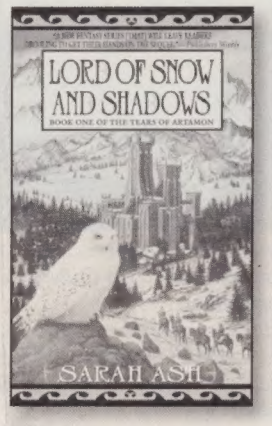

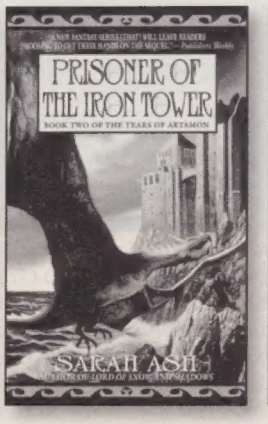

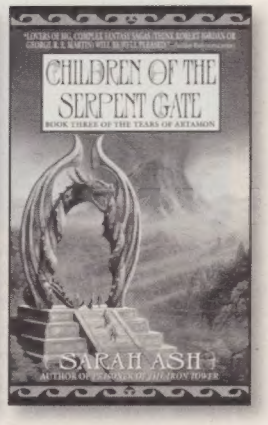

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SPECTRA

contents

departments

6 CONTRIBUTORS

8 FOLKROOTS
By Midori Snyder
In tales past and present, nothing can keep the swan maiden down.

20 MOVIES
By Resa Nelson
Freddie Highmore shines as twin brothers in *The Spiderwick Chronicles.*

28 BOOKS
By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer
Cities transcend settings to become major characters in several new novels.

46 GALLERY
By Karen Haber
James Gurney's alternate universe is an enticing combination of the real and the fantastic.

84 GAMES
By Eric T. Baker
You will love fighting and exploring and talking your way through *Mass Effect.*

fiction

38 GIFT FROM A SPRING *By Delia Sherman*
Magic cannot be tamed or captured, and neither can love, much as we'd like to think otherwise.

52 THE DOOM OF LOVE IN SMALL SPACES *By Ken Scholes*
When you're almost completely out of love and hope, sometimes you just want to hunker down under your desk and let the world go to hell.

58 ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER OF HEAVEN *By Richard Parks*
Crossing the River of Heaven on a bridge of birds takes luck, courage, and friends in high places. If you don't have the last one, the first two don't count.

64 GIRL IN PIECES *By Graham Edwards*
The dark detective in the really cool coat is back in another transdimensional mystery, this time with a large and muddy sidekick named Byron.

72 THE DINOSAUR DIARIES *By Scott William Carter*
Sometimes who you really are turns out to be far less important than who you are trying to be.

ABOVE/TOP: Author and illustrator James Gurney has taken a third excursion into the land of Dinotopia, this time in a Journey to Chandara. *Turn to the Gallery on page 46 for a glimpse into this stunning world of dinosaurs.*
COVER: Photographer Joseph Corsentino has created his own world of urban faeries, angels, and vampires; shown here is a beautiful Classical faerie. Visit www.timeofthefaeries.com to see more of his work and to order his book, Time of the Faeries, *published by Imaginosis. A 2008 calendar is also available.*

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SCOTT WILLIAM CARTER has sold over two dozen stories to such places as *Analog, Asimov's, Ellery Queen, Realms of Fantasy,* and *Weird Tales,* as well as to anthologies by Pocket Books and DAW. Among other things, he has been a bookstore owner, ski instructor, and computer trainer, but truly realized he was going to make something of his life when he spent four long nights picking beets off a conveyer belt at a cannery. He lives in Oregon with his patient wife, two young children, two indifferent cats, a faithful dog, and thousands of imaginary friends. Find out more about his work at www.scottwilliamcarter.com.

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Scholes

KEN SCHOLES has sold short fiction to *Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Aeon Speculative, Talebones, Polyphony 6, TEL: Stories,* and other magazines and anthologies. He is a winner of the Writers of the Future contest with a story appearing in *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future* Volume XXI. His first stand-alone project, *Last Flight of the Goddess,* is available from Fairwood Press as a limited edition, hardcover novella. Ken lives in Oregon with his amazing wonder-wife Jen West Scholes. Visit his website at www.sff.net/people/kenscholes.

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MIDORI SNYDER is the author of eight books for children and adults. She won the Mythopoeic Award for *The Innamorati,* a novel inspired by early Roman myth and the Italian "Commedia del'Arte" tradition. Her other novels include *The Flight of Michael McBride, Soulstring, The Oran Trilogy: New Moon, Sadar's Keep, Beldan's Fire,* and *Hannah's Garden.* Her short stories and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.* Snyder is co-editor (with Terri Windling) of The Endicott Studio's *Journal of Mythic Arts* (www.endicottstudio.com), and of Endicott's new mythic arts blog (http://endicottstudio.typepad.com).

CAT SCOTT was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, and, like many artists, spent her childhood drawing and painting. With generous gifts of art supplies from her parents, she developed quite a knack for rendering. After taking as many art classes as possible during her high school years, she ventured off to the University of Dayton to study graphic design. Her love for the fine arts led her to concentrate on Illustration. After receiving several awards for her art and being honored as the Most Outstanding Graduating Senior in Visual Communication Design, she graduated with honors in 2003. In 2006 Cat attended the Illustration Academy and worked with illustrators and artists such as John and Mark English, Sterling Hundley, George Pratt, Gary Kelley, Brent Watkinson, Anita Kunz, and CF Payne. To see more of her work, go to www.catscottart.com.

Prothero

TIFFANY PROTHERO has been a freelance illustrator in New York for nearly two years. She graduated from San Francisco's Academy of Art University, with an emphasis in book cover illustration. Whether it be quiet thought-provoking moments, or strong emotional tone, Tiffany's art is about allowing the viewer to walk away with a sense of personality and character from her illustration. Like her art, Tiffany's charming personality has brought her great opportunity's and great friendships from within the industry. For more of her work visit www.TProthero.com.

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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Midori Snyder

In tales past and present, nothing can keep the swan maiden down.

It is hard to imagine a more visually beautiful image in folk tales than the one presented by the figures of the swan maiden and her sisters. With a flurry of wings, they swoop down from the sky to glide elegantly across a clear pond. Then, throwing off their feathered gowns, they bathe and frolic in the water as women. They are always lovely, sensual, a combination of exotic sexuality and innocent charm.

In the traditional swan maiden narrative, a hunter or young prince is smitten with love at first sight for the youngest swan sister—smitten enough to commit several crimes against the very object of his desire for the sole purpose of keeping such a magical creature within his grasp. These crimes culminate in marriage and the attempted domestication of the wild, fantastical swan maiden, turned into a wife and mother. But this is less a tale about love than one about marital coercion and confusion. Neither husband nor wife is on the same page; their union is at best a tenuous détente, made possible only by the husband's theft of the swan maiden's feathered gown, forcing her to remain human and estranged from her own world. The husband has done nothing to earn such a powerful wife, and the swan maiden has no opportunity to choose her own fate. This is a marriage that cannot last in its fractured form. It must either go forward to find a level playing field for husband and wife, or it must end in miserable dissolution.

Russian Symbolist Mikhail Vrubel painted his opera singer wife in costume for her starring role in The Swan Princess *in 1900.*

Let us consider a European version of the tale reconstructed from a variety of sources by Victorian author Joseph Jacobs. A hunter is spending the night in a clump of bushes on the edge of a pond, hoping to capture wild ducks. At midnight, hearing the whirring of wings, he is astonished to see not ducks but seven maidens clad in robes of feathers alight on the bank, disrobe, and begin to bathe and sport in the water. The hunter seizes the opportunity to creep through the bushes and steal one of the robes. When dawn approaches, the sisters gather their garments and prepare to leave, but the youngest sister is distraught, unable to find her robe. Daylight is coming and the older sisters cannot wait for her. They leave her behind, telling her "to meet your fate whatever it may be."

As soon as the sisters are out of sight, the hunter approaches her, holding the feathered robe. The young maiden weeps and begs for its return, but the hunter, already too much in love, refuses. Instead, he covers her with his cloak and takes her home. Once there, he hides her robe, knowing that if she puts it on again, he will lose her. They are married, and she gifts him with two children, a boy and a girl.

One day, while playing hide-and-seek, the little girl finds the hidden robe and brings it to her mother. Without a moment's hesitation, the mother slips on the robe. We can almost imagine the mother's sigh of relief to be herself again, her true fantastic self, and not the pale wife weighted down by domestic drudgery. And yet, she offers a spark of hope for the future of the marriage. "Tell your father, if he wishes to see me again, he must find me in the land East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," she says to her daughter just before flying out the window.

No matter how compliant a swan maiden may appear as a wife, there remains an unspoken anxiety and tension beneath the surface of her marriage. Her husband can never be certain of her affection for

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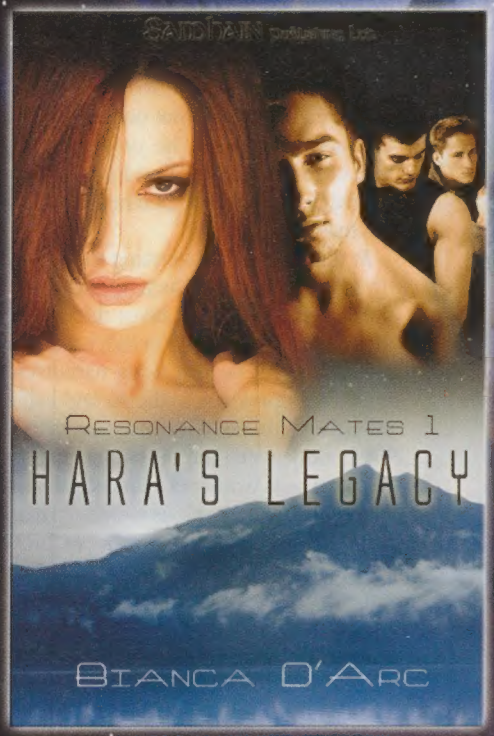

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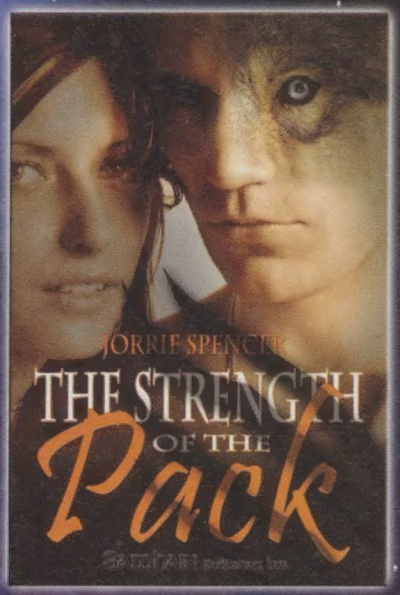

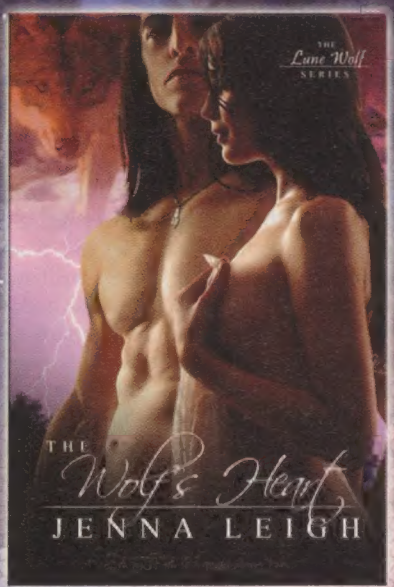

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In this illustration from Swan Lake *by Pyotr I.Tchaikovsky, artist Lisbeth Zwerger shows the Swan Queen and her friends changing back into birds again.*

it has been held hostage by her stolen skin. He offers her his cloak, but it is an exchange of unequal goods. Her feathered robe is the sign of her wild nature, of her freedom, and of her power, while his cloak becomes the instrument of her domestication, of her submission in human society. He steals her identity, the very thing that attracted him, and then turns her into his most precious prize, a pale version of the original creature of magic.

Conflict is never far beneath the veneer of the swan maiden's compliance. In a German version of the tale, a hunter captures a swan maiden's skin, and although she follows him home pleading for its return, he offers her only marriage. She accepts, not out of love but to remain close to the skin that is her identity. Fifteen years and several children later, the hunter leaves to go on a hunting trip, for once forgetting to lock the attic. Alone in the house, the wife searches the attic and finds her skin in a dusty chest. She immediately puts it on and flies out the window before the startled eyes of her children, with nary a word of farewell. A crane wife in China coaxes her mother-in-law to show her the hidden skin. When the old woman hesitates, the wife counters by saying,"I was once a heavenly maiden. But now I am married to your son and we have had a child. How can you think I would leave you?" Convinced, the mother-in-law allows her to see the garment. The moment the crane wife touches it she transforms into her bird shape and flies out through the roof-vent.

In some variants of the story, the swan maiden uses a taboo or prohibition to acquire some bargaining chip in the unfair marriage deal. If the husband breaks this prohibition, he loses all hold on her. The Haida Indians of the Pacific Northwest tell a version in which a chief's son spies two women bathing in a pond, their goose skins hanging from a tree. He snatches both skins, and when the women beg for them he returns the skin of the elder sister but covers the younger sister with his marten cloak (the sign of his wealth and status) and brings her home to be married. His wife, however, retains some of her goose nature, eating only edible roots and secretly retrieving her goose skin from its hiding place at night, flying to the shore to eat sea grasses. When famine comes to the village, the wife implores her own family for help and flocks of geese bring food to sustain the starving villagers. When an ungrateful neighbor complains about receiving nothing but "goose food," however, the insulted wife gathers up her goose skin and flies home.

More often it is the husband's foolishness that costs him his magical marriage. In a Javanese tale, the husband peeks inside a boiling rice pot even though his swan wife has prohibited this. He is confused to find only a single grain of rice boiling at the bottom. When his wife returns home and opens the lid, instead of finding a magically full pot she sees only the single grain and knows her husband has broken the taboo. Now she must labor like human women to prepare rice for their meal. She finds her skin at the bottom of a storage bin and angrily prepares to leave the marriage, but only after she has exhausted her husband's remaining store of rice. Prohibitions such as this one allow room for negotiation between such mismatched couples. The swan maiden maintains a modicum of her fantastic identity within the guise of a human wife; and the husband certainly benefits from her power. But once again, as with the theft of her skin, he proves he can not trust or respect her. He thus loses his wife and the magic and creative potential she brings to the marriage.

At this point it is interesting to examine the divergent solutions to such an untenable relationship. In many narratives there follows a second half to the story (in fact, some scholars argue that the swan maiden narratives exist merely as a prologue to the second half of the tale): the chastened husband's search to regain his fantastic wife. The husband, now charged to prove he is worthy of a fantastical marriage, must undertake a perilous journey to reach the home of his former wife. The locations are always in the realm of the fantastic or the celestial, such as "East o' the sun, West o' the moon," or "through a dark, wild forest to a Crystal Palace high atop a glass mountain." In the Haida story, the chief's son must climb a ladder of human bones to reach the fantastical world above. Along the way he encounters various people to whom he offers assistance, and for each one of these acts of generosity he receives a magic object to help him complete his journey. In a similar Serbian version, a husband frees several animals—a fish, a fox, and a wolf—and gathers a magic token from each one that will insure his later success.

It is interesting to note that many of these versions also include events that show the husband to be something of a trickster character, which may be a way to reconsider or re-frame his trickster-like behavior at the beginning of the tale when he steals the swan skin. In these stories the husband outwits various powerful figures to gain a series of magical objects. One husband, for example, encounters a pair of brothers arguing over their inheritance: a cap of invisibility and magic boots that will transport the wearer anywhere he desires. When the brothers ask for help in settling the argument, the husband slyly suggests a race —and then, when the pair is off and running, he puts on the cap and boots himself and makes his getaway. In the Haida story, the chief's son uses the magic gifts he has collected on his way up the bone ladder to trick celestial beings into giving him much needed advice on where to find his wife's village.

So how successful are these "Johnny-come-

lately" heroes? The outcome varies from version to version, many of which do not end happily. The husband has undertaken a rite of passage that usually belongs to a younger, single man—not one who has already married and lost his wife through selfishness or immaturity. Added to this, his swan wife has now returned to her original form. She seems barely touched by her years of human marriage. It is as though both husband and wife exist in a permanent adolescence. Perhaps then, what is at the heart of these tales is the recognition that marriage cannot succeed without maturity; without completion of the rites of passage that signal the movement from adolescence to adulthood—and, particularly, without the implicit involvement of families and communities. The hunter acts like a child, snatching for himself a prize in the youngest sister—a prize he can only keep through deception. But the swan maiden's immaturity and rebellion are also highlighted in tales. In some versions she has made herself vulnerable to this fate by leaving the security of her sisters and swimming alone. In a version from Romania, for example, a swan maiden leaves her fairy mother's house and swim alone even though she has been explicitly warned that it is dangerous. Impulsive behaviors have problematic consequences for young swan maidens and hunters alike.

Thus the ultimate success of the marriage union in these tales often depends on the willingness of both husband and wife to undergo transformations that signal their maturation as adults. In a complicated German story, the husband manages to get inside the castle walls separating him from his former wife by hiding in a bag of flour. Delighted that he has come to "redeem" her, she tells him the secret to the tasks he must complete. Each day, for the next three days, three dragons will appear to torment him—but he must not cry out or make a sound. If he succeeds, she'll then return home to her human marriage. The dragons come, and on the final day they swallow the husband whole. Three hours later, he's released unharmed in an act of rebirth and transformation that echoes his wife's shape-shifting. The dragons dissolve, revealing three swan sisters transformed into noblewomen. They praise the husband for "redeeming" them through his acts of love and sacrifice. Now that both husband and wife have creatively and fantastically changed each other into something new, a "happily-ever-after" ending is possible for this couple.

But when there are failures, they are both miserable and spectacular. In such versions, either the husband can never quite rise above his immaturity or the swan maiden, once freed, refuses to surrender her power again to a man not worthy of it. These tales of irreconcilable marriage offer a stark contrast to the more familiar body of folk and fairy tales in which the successful initiation of a hero or heroine is followed by a long and happy union. The swan maiden stories suggest that there are marriages that will themselves to dissolution because of the inability of the pair to mature and to integrate into each other's world. In the human world, the swan maiden loses her fantastic nobility and is subjected to the daily labors of a human wife—including childbearing, which is portrayed as so distasteful the swan wives often seem to have few qualms about leaving their children behind the moment they recover their skins. The husband either cannot find her world (and dies of melancholy), or when he does succeed in arriving in her domain, he cannot accept the fantastical world on his wife's terms. These are, at best, temporary reunions. The chief's son, dissatisfied with life in the goose-wife's village, eventually asks to be returned home. The birds debate as to who is strong enough to carry him down, until it at last the task falls to Raven. But on the journey, Raven grows weary of his burden and drops the man—who promptly transforms into a noisy seagull the moment he hits the rocks. There other husbands who consent to live a long time in their wives' domains, only to leave and return home alone before the end of their lives.

A fascinating Irish-American version of the tale suggests that these unbalanced unions have a great potential for destruction—not just for the hapless couple but for the larger com-

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munity as well. In "Why the Irish Came to America," collected from an Irish settlement in the Ozark Mountains, the King of France goes hunting and stumbles upon a flock of white swans. An old monk warns the king not kill the swans, for they are swan maidens. The king watches them transform and steals their skins, refusing to return them unless the maidens promise to carry him up to their enchanted domain. Each sister agrees, and one by one they haul the king into the sky, the youngest sister being the last. The king marries the youngest and appears to live quite happily, but he eventually grows homesick and wants to return for a visit. His wife builds him a flying boat, but tells him he must not set foot on human ground or he will die. Of course, as soon as he arrives back in his homeland he breaks this taboo, and Death is there to greet him. The king (displaying little nobility here) suggests that Death harvest all the old men standing around, but Death insists it's the King of France he wants. The king, in classic trickster fashion, tricks Death into getting into a box, slams the box shut, and flies home to his wife. Upon his return, his swan wife warns him never to open the box or they will die. Not wanting to keep such a dangerous object, the king waits for the next big storm and drops the box into the ocean—where it floats for a long time until it reaches the shores of Ireland. Two fisherman scoop it out of the waves, releasing a very cranky Death who begins killing people all over Ireland to make up for lost time—thus inciting the mass migration of Irishmen to America.

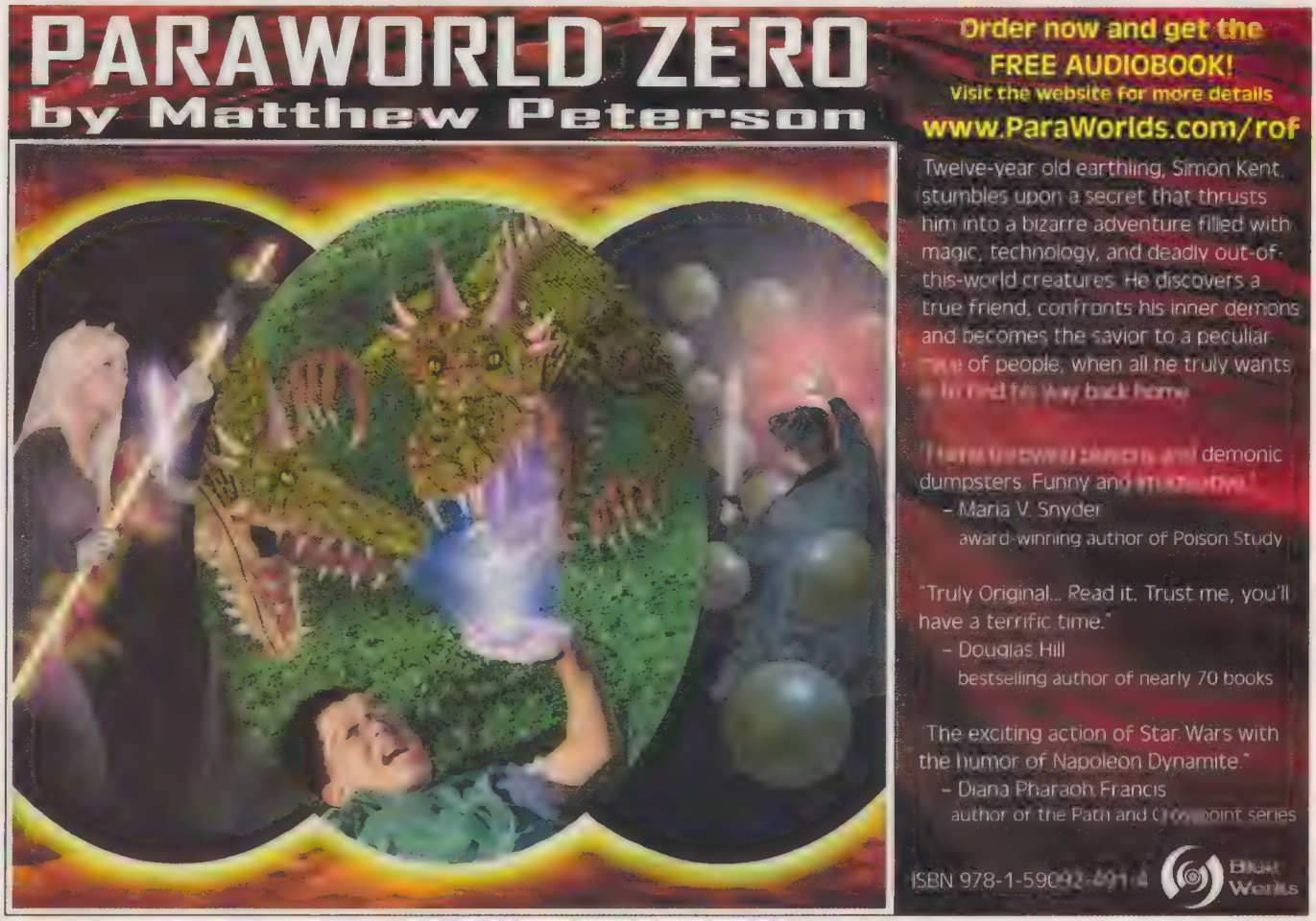
In most versions of the tale, we know very little of swan maiden's life as a human woman, only her persistent longing to return home. Across Siberia and Mongolia, sullen geese-wives watch wild geese migrating home with burning sorrow. A Chinese swan wife weeps uncontrollably until her mother-in-law, unable to stand it any longer, gives away the skin's hiding place. The swan woman leaves ... and then returns, missing the child she's left behind. But when she sees the boy, she is too ashamed to admit she is his mother and flies away once more. In Greek stories, the freed swan wives return in secret afterwards—cleaning house and sewing for their children, as if unable to break the domestic habit.

And then there are the feisty swan maidens who harbor serious grudges over the temporary loss of their skins. There are no second chances for the foolish husbands who imprisoned them in the mundane world. In her book *The Women of Turkey and Their Folklore* (1890), Lucy Garnett provides a boisterous example of a swan-maiden known as a Samodiva. The Samodiva resolutely despises her forced domestication. At a party intended to celebrate the birth of their son, her drunken husband asks her to dance. She agrees, but argues that the dance would be much better if she could wear her feathered gown. Her fool of a husband, intending to impress his fellow hunters, agrees and retrieves the hidden garment. Changed back into her original form, the Samodiva maximizes the humiliation of her husband by taunting him with a song:

> *Hear my words, O Stotian; seek not*
> *For thy wife a Samodiva—*
> *Samodivas are not thrifty,*
> *Know not how to tend the children.*
> *Said I not to thee, O Stoian,*
> *Samodivas are not housewives?"*

The Volundarkvida, an ancient Nordic edda, offers another type of independent swan maiden. In this prose poem, three swan women fly up from the south to spin fine linen on a beach. There, they are met by three hunters who take them home as wives. But after seven years, the women, who are actually Valkyries (the supernatural battle-maidens who attend Odin), grow restless and return home to the battlefields. Even as human wives, they had not given up much of their fantastic nature, for their spinning connected their domestic activity to a more magic one: that of the Fates spinning the length of a man's life.

Some swan maiden tales celebrate the powerful connections between the human world and the fantastic. A number of Mongolian cre-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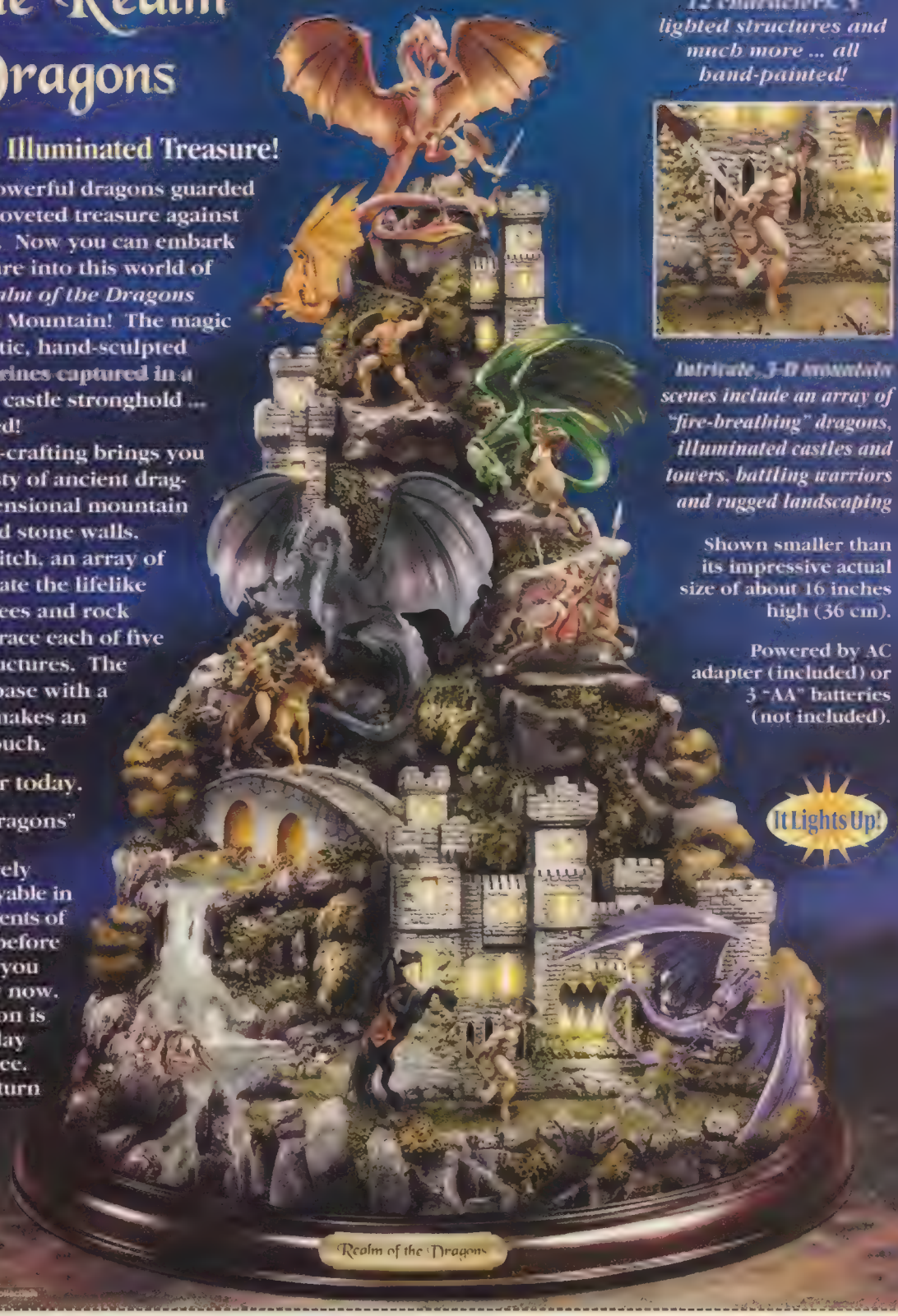

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ation tales trace the origin of clan heroes to their powerful swan mothers. Among Siberian tribes, the hunting and killing of swans is considered a sin and an offense against this first mother. A Buryat swan maiden tale tells how the swan maiden patiently waits for her chance to recover her feathered skin only after she has produced eleven children for her hunter husband. When she asks her husband if he remembers where he hid the old skin, the husband, trusting her after so many years, obligingly shows it to her. She immediately slips it on and flies up to the roof vents. From there she declares her intention to return to heaven, and commands her children to perform special ceremonies in her honor every spring and autumn when the swans migrate. The narrative also offers one small etiological detail: A daughter with sooty hands reaches up to grab her mother's disappearing feet; the soot wipes off on the webbed feet, leaving swans with black feet ever since.

In his article "A Note on the Demon Queen Eleanor," Robert Chapman notes that Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine herself became the subject of an unflattering swan maiden legend. "Eleanor was the kind of person who would attract legend in any age. She had an uncanny ability to get and keep the upper hand, she had sway over powerful men, her management was firm and aggressive." The monk Richard of Devizes described her as "Queen Alienor—an incomparable woman." But, as can be expected, along with her many admirers Eleanor also attracted detractors who propagated quite a few nasty tales about her. Walter Map, a member of Henry II's court and definitely not one of Eleanor's admirers, was probably trying to insult her when he related the tale of "Henno-With-The-Teeth," the story of the demon countess of Anjou. The story follows the structure of a swan maiden tale. Henno meets a beautiful princess on the Norman shore, the intended bride of the King of France. Henno marries her instead and begets a number of children. He then loses her after he spies on her bath and sees her in her true dragon form. Chapman argues that this Demon Queen tale, told during Eleanor's life, quickly embedded itself as the basis for further unsavory legends shortly after her death. Philippe Mouskes, in his *chronique rime* (ca. 1240), provides a terse list of the "facts" about Eleanor's birth, claiming that her father, the Count of Aquitaine, met a beautiful lady near a fountain; they married and had children, including Eleanor. After a space of time, the Countess, when confronted by the Christian sacrament, transformed into a swan and flew away through the church roof.

The figure of Eleanor of Aquitaine continued to ignite popular imagination so that some fifty years after her death she was transformed again from the daughter of a swan maiden to a swan maiden herself. In the 13th century, a Middle English romance, *Richard Coeur de Lion*, recounts that the hero's mother is a beautiful stranger named Cassodorien, daughter to the King of Antioch. At the wedding ceremony to Henry II, Cassodorien faints during the consecration of the host and deftly manages to avoid the sacrament. Some fifteen years later Henry bows to the pressure of a suspicious earl that Cassodorien be forced to view the host. Like all the previous swan maiden husbands, he is shocked when she transforms into a swan, taking her daughter with her and knocking Prince John over so hard that he breaks his arm. The poet-author must have been confident that listeners would have substituted Eleanor's name for Cassodorien, keeping alive Eleanor's reputation as a demon queen well after her death.

There was considerable renewed interest in the swan maiden tales in Europe throughout the late 19th century. For the English Victorians it was the era of the "Married Woman's Property Acts" and of the "New Woman." Marriage roles, divorce, and the appropriate role of a wife were being re-examined and questioned. The swan maiden, with her ability to effectively fly away from her marriage and her children, became a fascinating study for Victorian folklorists, who saw in the narrative the evolution of the institution of marriage. According to Carol Silver in her illuminating article "East of the Sun and West of the Moon": Victorians and Fairy Brides, the interpretations of the tale varied widely, and depended on one's attitudes toward women's role in marriage, an imbalance of power between the sexes and women's sexuality. Joseph Jacobs, editor of English folktales for children, felt that the reader's sympathy lay with the abandoned husband, not the swan maiden as representative of a matrilineal society with "easy and primitive" marriage bonds that could be more easily broken. Silver reports that Jacobs believed "that the 'eerie wife,' in separating from her mate, forfeited the audience's respect; her behavior reinforced the listener's sympathy with the husband. 'Is he not,' Jacobs

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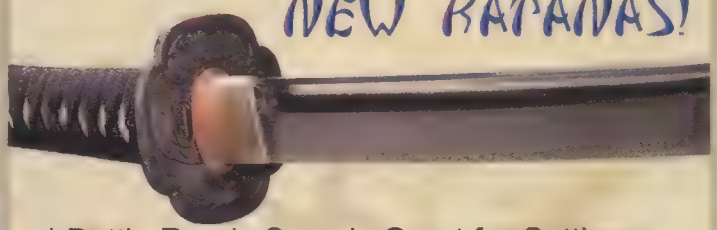

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asked, to be 'regarded as the superior of the fickle, mysterious maid that leaves him for the break of a taboo?'" Silver argues that folklorists like Jacobs were expressing anxiety over the emerging institution of divorce, believing that the looseness of the marriage bond was a trait among "savages." Silver continues: "Clearly, free and easy separation was associated with primitive societies and savage eras. Complex and difficult divorce, on the other hand, was the hallmark of a highly evolved society.... By diminishing the claims to superiority of the fairy bride, neutralizing her sexuality, and limiting or denying her right to divorce, Victorian folklorists rendered her acceptable to themselves and their society."

If the swan maiden in Victorian folklore studies was to be relegated to an outmoded and primitive expression of marriage and dreaded matriarchy, popular imagination found in her a powerful call to transformation. English women were jolted by the appearance of Nora, the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *The Dolls House*. Torvald, Nora's patronizing husband, calls Nora a "skylark" and "an elf." In a plot twisted by threats of blackmail, Nora tries to prevent Torvald from discovering the blackmailer's letter by putting on a ruffled costumed kept in a closet and "dancing a tarantella" for him. It is a swan maiden gesture worthy of Samodiva, or of the Japanese crane wife whose dance mesmerizes her hapless husband as she tries to manufacture her escape. But Nora is not successful and, later, a frightened Torvald unfairly blames Nora for the blackmail, verbally attacking his wife and accusing her of being unfit to raise their children. When the blackmail is withdrawn, Torvald forgives his wife—but now it is too late. The final scene is not one of reconciliation, but of the slam of the door as Nora leaves. It is the modern version of divorce swan-maiden style.

In some versions of the story, the swan maiden's husband must travel to her home world in an attempt to win her back.

Can we love the swan maiden? She seems to offer both an image of feminine power and feminine weakness: a girl who submits to the deceptions of a suitor and a woman who rejects the terms of an unfair marriage. She is at once a doting mother and one who will happily abandon her children in favor of her own needs. Her ambiguous tale can be read as the the suppression of women's rights and women's creative power through enforced domestication, but it can also show such a woman's resolve to not only survive a questionable marriage but to remain true to her nature. When given the chance, no amount of suppression can keep the swan maiden down. I feel a terrible tenderness for the youngest swan-girl, abandoned by her sisters to her fate on the ground. I want to shelter her from the routine ordinariness of her human marriage, given over to the demands of others. And I want to cheer, relieved and inspired, when she finds her own true self again, and rises to soar. ❧

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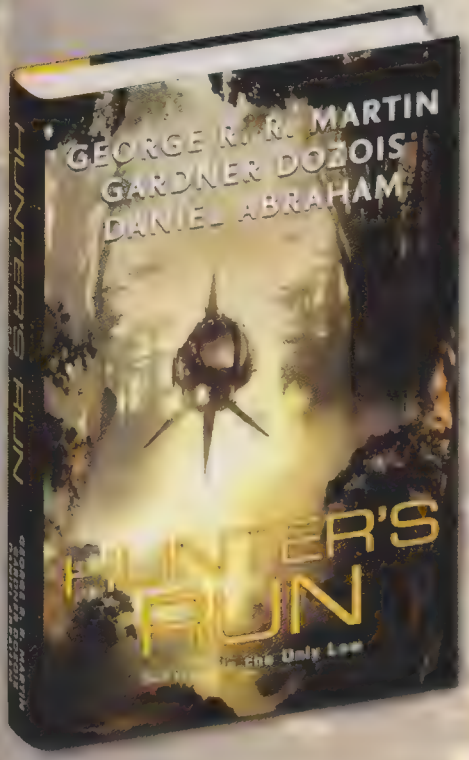

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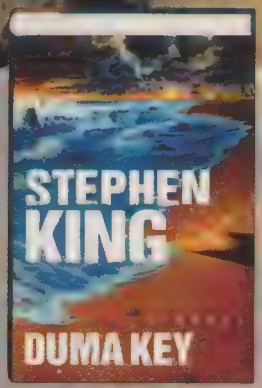

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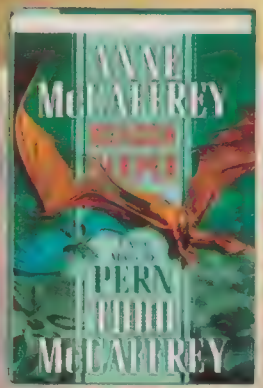

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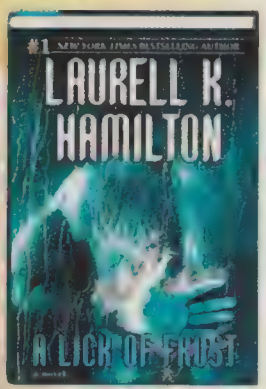

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By Resa Nelson

The Grace children—Jared, Simon, and Mallory—encounter sprites, trolls, goblins, brownies, a griffin, and many other strange and wonderful creatures as they explore the world of faerie.

Freddie Highmore shines as twin brothers in *The Spiderwick Chronicles.*

Photos courtesy of Paramount Pictures

What if the faerie world was real? What if all the creatures inhabiting that world were invisible and lived among us? What if there was a way to see them—and what if you could get your hands on a book that revealed all their secrets? Welcome to the world of *The Spiderwick Chronicles,* a movie slated to open on February 15 (Paramount Pictures) that's based on the series of five children's books by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black.

The Spiderwick Chronicles tells the story of what happens to a family in the wake of divorce. Helen Grace (played by Mary-Louise Parker of TV's *Weeds*) moves with her three children into an empty, rickety Victorian house owned by her Aunt Lucinda (Joan Plowright of *Tea with Mussolini*), who currently resides at an institute for mental patients.

Nine-year-old Jared Grace (Freddie Highmore of *Finding Neverland, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) is hardest hit by the divorce. Jared's twin brother Simon (also played by Highmore) is an aspiring veterinarian, so he's focused on finding any potential pets that might cross his path. Their older sister Mallory (played by Sarah Bolger of *Premonition, In America*) is an avid fencer, so she takes out her frustration during fencing practice. Having no real interests of his own, Jared works out his anger by getting in fights with his classmates.

Soon after the move into Aunt Lucinda's house, Jared hears a strange noise that travels under the floorboards and through the walls. Then he discovers a secret room in the house and an eerie warning. Following more clues, Jared ends up in the attic of the house, where he discovers a book called *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You.*

It's a book about faeries. Jared asks his mother about the author, Arthur Spiderwick, and she specu-

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The Spiderwick Chronicles: Holly Black

Realms of Fantasy: How did you become interested in fairies and learn so much about their world?

Holly Black: I started being interested in faeries when I read Brian Froud and Alan Lee's *Faeries*. Between the illustrations and the folklore, that book showed them as dangerous and capricious creatures, not tiny pink sparkly things with wings. It also pushed me to read more about faery folklore and find authors like Evans-Wentz, MacManus, and Briggs, who helped broaden my faerie education.

ROF: At the beginning of each *Spiderwick Chronicles* book, there's a letter from you to the reader. You write that after a bookstore signing, a clerk gave you a letter addressed to both you and artist Tony DiTerlizzi. The letter was from three children—Jared, Simon, and Mallory Grace—who claimed to know a lot about fairies and told you their story. But how did you really come up with the idea for *The Spiderwick Chronicles*?

HB: Tony and I had been friends for a while and really loved the idea of doing a project about faeries together. We really did meet three kids who told us about their faerie experiences and we were charmed by the idea. After that, we worked out the details of the *Spiderwick* books together, then I went off and wrote them while Tony drew and we passed materials back and forth for commentary. It is a very collaborative process.

ROF: What do you think of the screenplay and the movie?

HB: I really think that [the screenplay] feels true to the characters and that it is a whole lot of fun. In many ways, the film reminds me of one of the 80s Amblin Entertainment movies, like *Gremlins* or *Goonies*, in really good ways. I love the family parts the most-watching the characters come alive and interact. I love when Jared is angry and Simon cuddles animals and Mallory waves around her sword. I love that even more than the goblins and the amazing troll and all the rest. I wish there was more space to include a few more of my favorite scenes, but I'm really happy with what I've seen.

ROF: What was it like for you to let go and hand your work over to filmmakers? (Especially when Richard Grace—the father of the Grace children in your novels—is a filmmaker himself!)

HB: Richard Grace is actually an actor, so I'm sure his main concern with the film was whether there was a part in it for him!

Tony and I mostly cared about the film being true to the spirit of the books rather than being a literal interpretation of the books. I felt like I had to let go and let Mark Waters (the director) and the rest of the filmmakers do what they do best.

ROF: Have any creatures from the books been left out of the movie?

HB: There are a few creatures that didn't make it into the film. Don't look for the phooka, the dwarves, or the elves. Do look for Byron, the sprites, the goblins, the redcap, plus Hogsqueal and Thimbletack, of course!

ROF: What do you think of the casting?

HB: Fantastic! We made a list of ideal people for characters and Tony and I both really liked David Strathairn for Arthur Spiderwick and are really excited that he was actually cast. Mary-Louise Parker is so good as a mother at the end of her rope. The kids are incredible—Freddie Highmore is fantastic as both Jared and Simon. He acts completely differently in the two roles and the scene where he plays himself talking to himself. And Sarah Bolger is not only perfect as Mallory, but was actually a reader of the series before the film, which is always nice to hear.

ROF: What can you tell us about the new *Spiderwick* trilogy?

HB: The new series is called *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles. The Nixie's Song* is the first book of the new series. It reverses some of the expectations of the original series. We said that faeries could be anywhere, but it's easier to imagine faeries in a crumbling old house in New England than in a shiny new development in Florida, where the new books are set. In them, Laurie, who believes in faeries and has purchased *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World* at a bookstore, wants her stepbrother, Nick, to help her look for them. Because their parents are recently married, Nick's dad wants everything to go well and tells Nick he has to go with Laurie and look for faeries, even if he doesn't believe in them. No one is more surprised than Nick when he's the one that sees something that Laurie doesn't. The first book came out in the middle of September [2007] and the second book, *A Giant Problem*, will be out September of 2008.

By Resa Nelson

lates that he might be a relative. After all, Aunt Lucinda's last name is Spiderwick. When he reads the field guide, Jared suspects the bizarre noises he's been hearing are an indication that there's a brownie in the house. Even worse, Jared suspects he's accidentally destroyed the brownie's home. According to the field guide, when brownies are angered, they turn into dangerous bogarts. To make amends, Jared creates a tiny new home for the brownie and puts it in the secret room. He soon comes face to face with the house brownie. Thimbletack (voiced by Martin Short of *The Santa Clause 3*, TV's *Merlin*), who warns Jared that he must destroy the field guide.

Taking no heed, Jared learns how to open his eyes to the fairy world, taking Simon and Mallory along for the ride. They encounter goblins, a troll, sprites, a griffin, and many other fantasy creatures that live in their neighborhood. But when they meet the ogre Mulgarath (Nick Nolte of *Affliction, The Prince of Tides*), they begin to understand why the brownie warned them to get rid of the field guide and mind their own business.

"The field guide has all the secrets and all the defenses of all the fairies in the world," says director Mark Waters (*Freaky Friday, Just Like Heaven*). "Mulgarath realizes that if he has all this information, he could have dominion over all the fairy world. And once there are no good fairies to stop him, he can take over the human world, as well. He wants that book, and he's willing to kill for it. Jared's realizing, 'Holy moley—I've opened a Pandora's box.' And now they have to try to get it closed before Mom gets home from work."

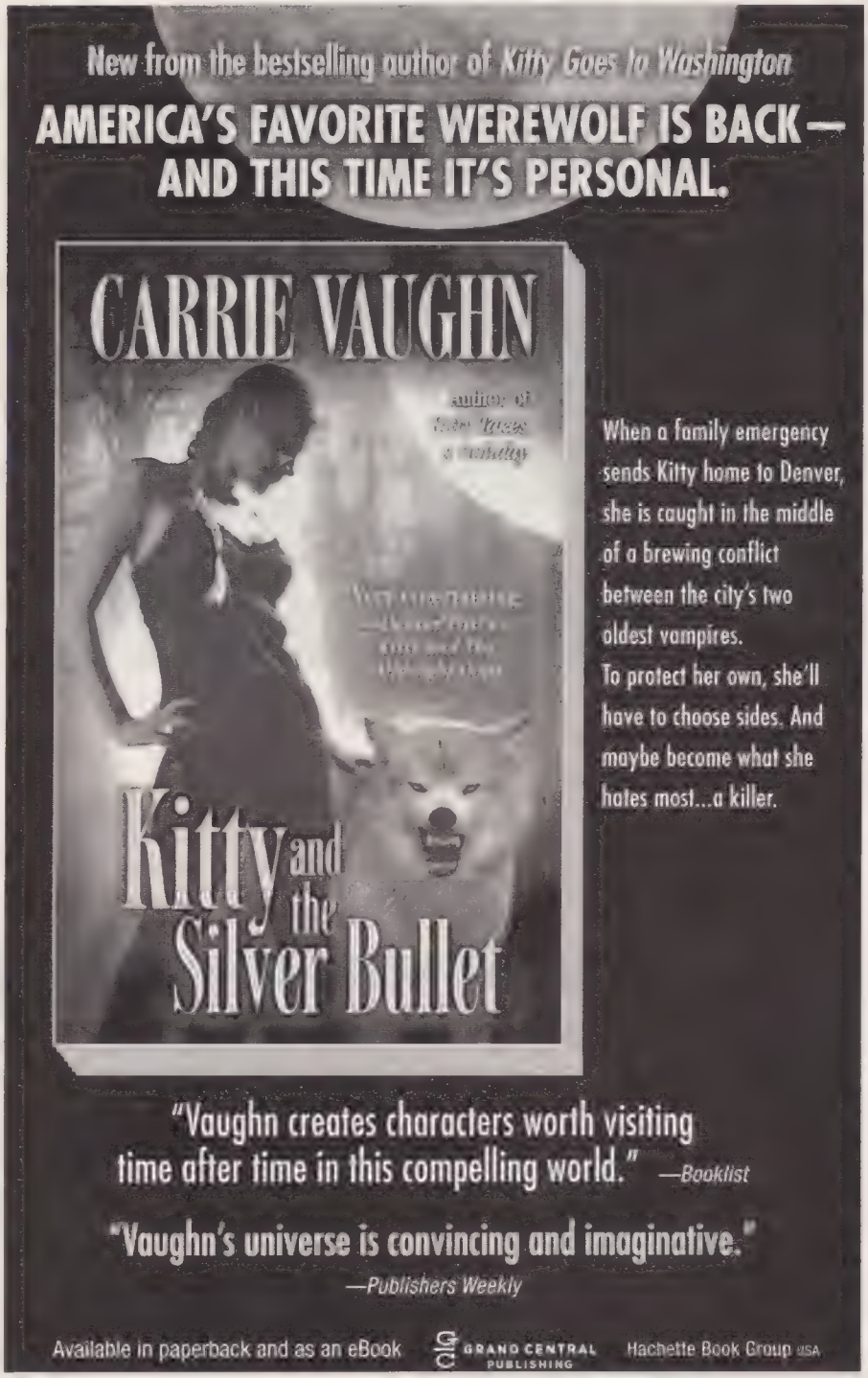
One of the challenges that Waters faced was how to translate the story of the Grace family from page to screen. Unlike the mammoth Harry Potter novels, each *Spiderwick* book is very short. Waters toyed with various options, including just using the books as a springboard. However, when legendary director/ screenwriter John Sayles (*The Secret of Roan Inish, The Brother from Another Planet, Matewan*) came on board, everything changed. Although

Karey Kirkpatrick (*Over the Hedge, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) wrote the script. Sayles played a major role in shaping the story.

"John Sayles was the first writer who said, 'Let's try to take all five books and make one movie,'" Waters says. "John said, 'I know a way to take this and condense it and make it work. Let's treat this with a real voracity of how a family going through a divorce interacts with each other.' It's the tone that John established, as well as the concept of the great big arc of the Grace kids' story."

Even though the books are intended for young readers, Waters decided to make a movie aimed at all ages. "The kids who first read these books when they came out in 2001, if they were 12 years old, they're now going to be 18 or 19 when they see the movie," Waters says. "So we don't want to make a movie that's geared only for 10- to 12-year-olds. Everything that's in the book is treated in a more dainty, light-hearted, intimate fashion. Let's explode it a bit and go for some supersizing and make it really exciting, more dynamic, more action packed. It's with Tony and Holly's blessing. They like the idea of taking it and making it happen on a more epic scale and with a grander sweep and go for more excitement."

Although Waters is a first-timer in the CGI world, he's a veteran director of fantasy movies. "I'm more of a person who doesn't like pure, serious fantasy. I like to have a little bit of cleverness and whimsy built in. *Freaky Friday* was short on fantasy and high on comedy, but I'm always intrigued by taking the real world and making it a little bit whacked and seeing how people react to that. One of the reasons I took on *The Spiderwick Chronicles* is when I read these books, I realized that this whole fantasy genre always had this feeling of happening in the past. Or it's happening in Britain. Or it's Gothic orphans. In this wave of great CGI fantasy, it never felt like it was happening to these kids. Even a movie like *Bridge to Terabithia*, the fantasy wasn't really fantasy because it wasn't really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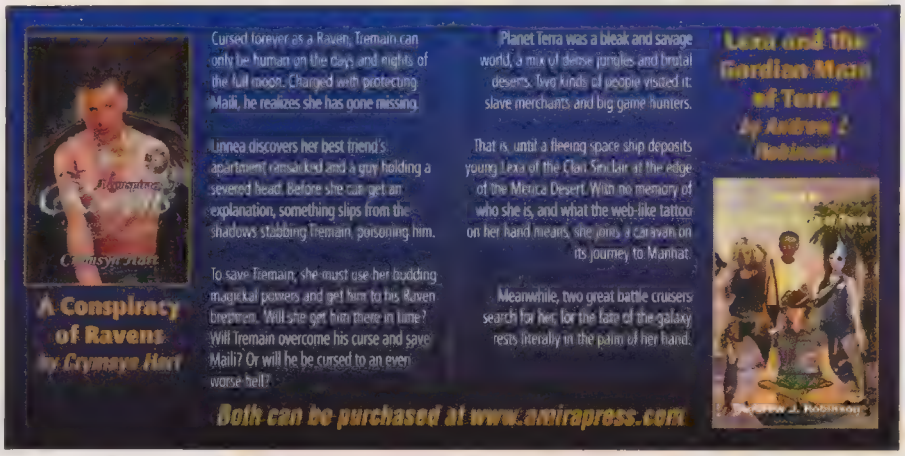
A Conspiracy of Ravens
Cursed forever as a Raven, Tremain can only be human on the days and nights of the full moon. Charged with protecting Maili, he realizes she has gone missing.
Linnea discovers her best friend's apartment ransacked and a guy holding a severed head. Before she can get an explanation, something slips from the shadows stabbing Tremain, poisoning him.
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happening. It was all a dream sequence.

"This is something Tony and Holly and I talked about: let's say we're all believers. Let's say that these creatures are around us and they're completely tangible, completely real. You just can't see them. And that's why you lose your socks. That's why you can't find your car keys, because a brownie moved them in your house. Everything in the real world could be explained by the fantastical creatures around you. Let's adopt that approach.

"Then when I talked to Phil Tippet and the people at ILM, I said, 'Let's act like these creatures are creatures that could have evolved on Earth, and we're going to design them as if they're combinations of mutations of creatures that could actually live here. Let's treat these things as if they could be completely real, and then let it become fantastic. But even when things are fantastic, they're not breaking-the-laws-of-physics fantastic. They're just more like, once you realize the big world of fantastic creatures around you, your eyes will never be closed again. The excitement of this process was saying, 'We're going to have a movie that feels like you're actually in it and if you're an American kid, this could happen to you.'"

In keeping with the larger scale of the movie, Industrial Light & Magic (also known as ILM, the visual effects house that George Lucas built) and Tippet Studios (which won an Oscar for its work on *Jurassic Park*) joined forces to create the creatures that inhabit the fairy world. The process began with shooting the movie in Montreal. The filmmakers used small mannequins and cardboard cutouts as stand-ins for the fantasy creatures. Waters then chose specific scenes and sent them with instructions for what he wanted to the visual effects studios. Waters says, "They first take it and do a rough animation that looks hand-drawn. Through several stages of the process, you get it to the point where it looks like a photo-real little creature that's sitting in your living room. It's an incredible process that I can't begin to say I understand myself. Every time another level of animation comes back to me, I say, 'Oh, my gosh! This is magic!'" Waters pauses and grins. "And they [Industrial Light & Magic] say, 'That's why we call ourselves that.' But it is a phenomenal thing to watch."

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tus of having hundreds and hundreds of animators working for you in post-production is something I've never come close to doing before. I've worked with children before. The idea of having Freddie Highmore act opposite himself—he's a young man and it's an extremely difficult part. I was able to coax him through it. And all of these imaginary creatures he was acting opposite, which were basically acted by me opposite of him. That kind of

work is not how you work with David Strathairn [who plays Arthur Spiderwick]."

Not that Waters is complaining. Hailing from the United Kingdom, Highmore is arguably today's best child actor. But when asked if he considered casting real-life identical twins in the movie, Waters's tone lightens, and he says, "Oh, believe me, I did. If you think shooting fairy creatures is difficult, having a minor-aged actor (who only can work five hours a day) doing motion control shots because he's opposite himself while an ogre is breaking through a wall—the complexity of those things is enormously time consuming. Luckily, we had an actor as good as Freddie. He's doing it all with an American accent, as well, just to add another notch to the degree of difficulty. We did a search in North America, Canada, England, and Ireland of identical twins to see if any of them could act. And we discovered that there was a resounding 'No.'"

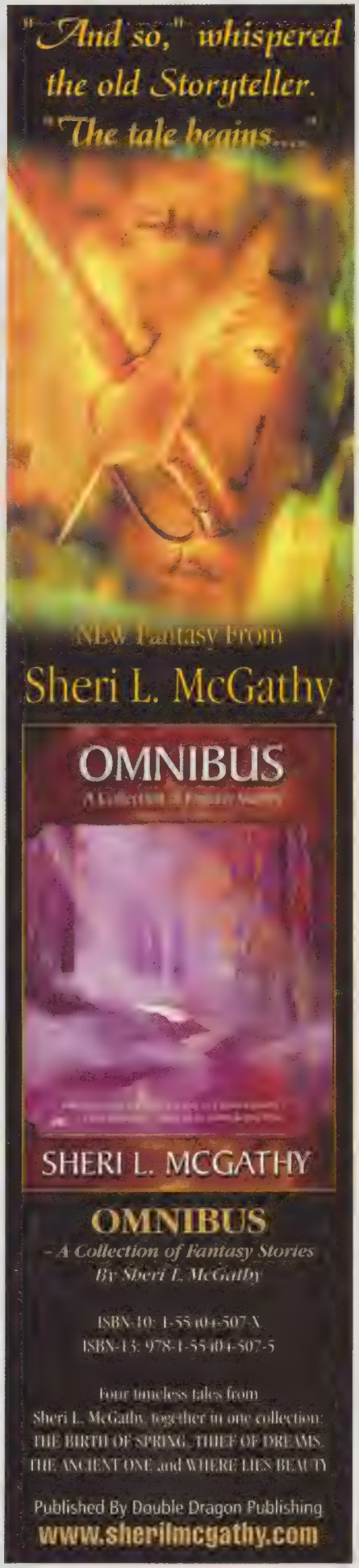
Some of the actors considered for the roles of Jared and Simon were professionals, while others just had good looks. Due to the complexity of the acting roles of the twins, Waters reached a point where he was willing to consider casting fraternal twins, despite the fact that Jared and Simon being identical twins plays a significant part in the overall story. "We couldn't find any two actors who were as good as Freddie by himself," Waters says. "When we had someone playing opposite Freddie, there was Freddie and then there was a huge dropoff to get someone to play in tune with him. It paid off with having this amazing dual-pronged performance, which is really wonderfully loyal to the books. Freddie puts in a pretty phenomenal performance. It's mind-boggling for a kid that young to be so good."

When casting *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, Waters experienced a first. Every actor at the top of his wish list signed up to play the role. But one character was literally built from the ground up: Aunt Lucinda's house, which becomes the new home of the fractured Grace family. "We built an entire exterior house with a complete working downstairs," Waters says, "because there are lots of scenes that move in and out of the house. Most houses that look like this are on the historical register, and you have to walk through them with socks on. They don't take kindly to having goblins attack the house. In order to do that, we had to build it from scratch. When you have something in your mind's eye, you don't want to settle for something that's pretty good. We found this perfect location nestled in the woods where it looked like Vermont, exactly the look we wanted. Let's just put the perfect house here that serves all our story purposes and have that feeling of a character in itself. Arthur Spiderwick is not in the movie for the most part. In a way, the house represents him through the course of the movie."

Unlike other fantasy series like *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Lemony Snicket*, the filmmakers blended all five books in the series into a single movie. Even so, that doesn't mean a sequel is out of the question. "I would love to keep making these movies," Waters says, "but it depends on what Tony and Holly come up with as the next chapters of this saga. They just finished the next book in the *Chronicles*, and it's the first in a trilogy, which involves a new family that's messed up in its own way. They end up calling upon Jared Grace to come help them out of their fantastical world jam. It's such an exciting world. If it continues to delight me, I would certainly go for more."

With regard to working with ILM and Tippet Studios, Waters says, "This group has blown me away. These are some of the coolest creatures I've ever seen. I can't believe I actually directed the movie. I can't believe I got the privilege of seeing these things come to life.

"This movie was an opportunity to play at the big, grand scale and to make the kind of movie that I saw as a kid that made me want to make movies. These kind of opportunities don't come around a lot." ❧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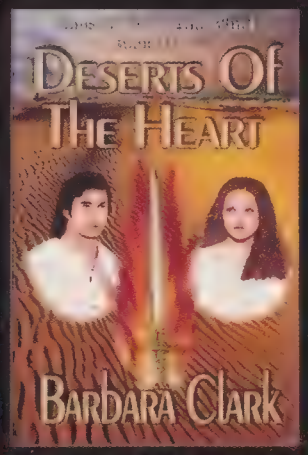

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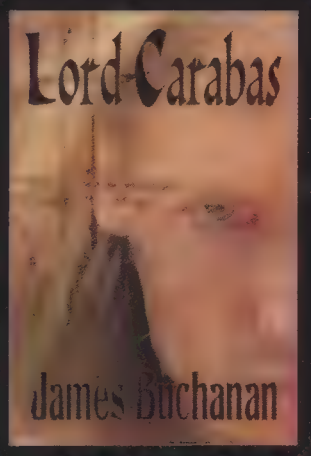

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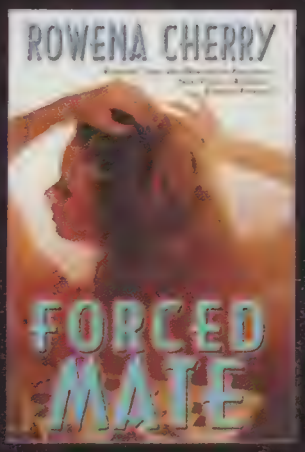

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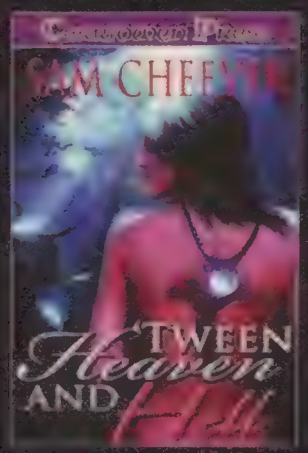

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By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

Cities transcend settings to become major characters in several new novels.

Cities figure in a large number of fantasies of all types, with urban fantasies actually set in cities real or imaginary. But there is a relatively short list of speculative novels that are extravagant celebrations, excavations, and explorations of particular cities, novels in which cities transcend mere setting and become full-blown characters in their own right. Delany's Bellona, Miéville's New Crobuzon, Harrison's Viriconium, VanderMeer's Ambergris, Peake's Gormenghast, Leiber's Lankhmar, and Moorcock's inexhaustible iterations of London spring immediately to mind. To this exclusive list can now be added Ararat, the god-infested metropolis that dominates Felix Gilman's towering first novel, ***Thunderer*** (Bantam Spectra, New York, hardcover, 438 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-80676-2).

Beauty and the Unicorn *by Rebecca Guay is featured in* Fantasy Art Now, which is reviewed *on page 36. Look for a Gallery feature on Rebecca Guay in the August issue of* Realms.

Subtitled "a novel of high fantasy," *Thunderer* is, in one sense, literally that, for much of the action takes place high in the air over Ararat, but otherwise the label is misapplied. The term is Tolkienesque, redolent of elves, Dark Lords, quests, and quasi-medieval settings. Only one of these by now thoroughly clichéd elements—the quest—is to be found in the pages of *Thunderer*, and it is turned inside out over the course of the novel. A better label might be "metafantasy," for Gilman exuberantly plunders sources literary, historical, and mythological in bringing his protean labyrinth of a city to life, and the mysterious act of creation by which the imaginary is made real, and the real imaginary, becomes one of the novel's main themes. The richly allusive name of the city itself showcases Gilman's method; it triggers all sorts of connections, biblical and otherwise, yet it turns out to be far more than the mere sum of such connections, and it's a testament to Gilman's writerly prowess that he fights his way past these initially distracting associations and subsumes them within his fiction.

Ararat is a city of gods. Lots of gods. An infinitude of them, large and small. They come; they go; they pass into and out of existence and even mingle with all the promiscuity of virtual particles and in so doing change the city and its inhabitants in unpredictable ways. Some gods vanish, never to return; others remain more or less constant presences; others appear at irregular intervals. As the novel opens, one of the latter, the Great Bird, manifests itself above the sprawl of Ararat: a vast white shape that casts no shadow. If it has a purpose, it is one beyond human apprehension.

An incidental effect of the Bird's passage is that some humans who are near enough to it, or possesses sufficient faith in it, or perhaps just by pure chance, temporarily gain the power of flight. These Bird worshippers are pulled along in the wake of the passing deity until they drift beyond the reach of its influence and plummet to their deaths. A young boy, Jack Sheppard, imprisoned in one of the city's many workhouses for children, has heard rumors of the Bird's coming that have swept the city in recent weeks; for there are those who are sensitive to such things. Jack contrives to be on the roof of the workhouse for hours at a stretch, wearing hidden beneath his drab uniform a self-made costume meant to invoke the Bird's power via sympathetic magic. When the Bird passes by, Jack leaps after it ... and receives enough of a lift to waft himself to a nearby rooftop, from there escaping into the streets.

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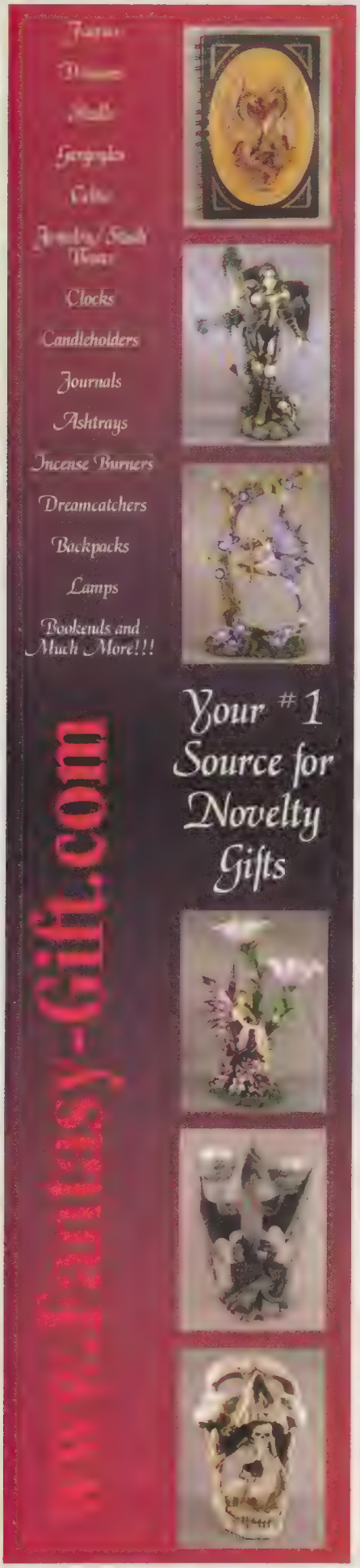


Jack is one of three main characters whose lives are directly impacted by the Bird. The others are a scientist, Professor Holbach, and a ship's captain, Arlandes. Both of these men work for Countess Ilona, an amoral autocrat who rules one of the patchwork fiefdoms into which the city is divided and harbors ambitions to expand her sphere of influence, by force if necessary. Holbach has developed a theory about the gods of Ararat, or rather a method of predicting their appearances and, if not controlling them, harnessing their power. This he does to spectacular effect in the case of the Great Bird, transferring its gravity-defying essence to a warship, the Thunderer. Arlandes is given command of the marvelous new airship, the first—and perhaps last—of its kind. Unfortunately, in a public relations stunt gone horribly awry, Arlandes's vivacious young wife is killed during the transfer, an accident that transforms the dashing young officer into a brittle shell of a man who denies himself every pleasure save self-laceration and the grim satisfaction of carrying out the Countess's increasingly pugnacious commands.

A fourth main character, and the pivotal figure of the novel, is Arjun, a young monk from a faraway town called Gad who has come to Ararat in search of a missing god. For time out of mind, the monks of Gad—called the Choir—have praised the disembodied essence of musical perfection they call the Voice. But when the Voice suddenly and inexplicably goes mute, Arjun becomes convinced that it has migrated, either willingly or pulled by some irresistible force, to distant Ararat, which he imagines is a kind of lodestone for gods. He follows, determined to find it and bring it back.

Entering the city in time to witness the Bird's flight, Arjun becomes acquainted with Holbach and put to work on an immense—and illegal—atlas of the city that Holbach is secretly compiling with the aid of other scientists and artists. In the course of his employment, Arjun finds not only unexpected love but a very different god than the object of his search—the god of the river that runs through Ararat, perhaps the oldest and most enduring of its gods: the Typhon. But the Typhon is a damaged god, its essence polluted, violated, by a dangerous man called, among other aliases, Shay. It is also a vengeful god, and it comes after Arjun with single-minded malice, stalking him through the streets of the city and the pages of the novel.

Jack, meanwhile, learns that the Bird's touch has remained with him, turning him into a kind of demigod himself: Jack Silk, or just Silk, a nom de guerre bestowed because of his shirt, a multicolored patchwork of silk threads. Like a cross between Peter Pan and Robin Hood, Jack frees other imprisoned children and turns them into a private street army, a gang he christens the Thunderers not because he admires the brutal uses to which Arlandes is putting the flying ship but because it symbolizes freedom to him.

Thus the main strands of a complex plot that Gilman weaves together with seemingly effortless dexterity. His skill at characterization is even more impressive. Holbach especially is brilliantly realized, an Oppenheimer-like figure whose innate humanity is engaged in a constant struggle with the unfettered imperatives of his genius. Secondary characters are fleshed out with Dickensian economy and depth. Looming over them all, containing them, permeating them, perhaps even manipulating them in mysterious ways, and yet shaped by them in ways equally mysterious, is Ararat, which may well prove to be an enduring contribution to the literature of the fantastic.

Another first novel celebrating the mystery and romance of what Italo Calvino dubbed "invisible cities" is Sylvia Kelso's ***Amberlight*** (Juno Books, Rockville, MD, hardcover, 240 pp. $29.95, ISBN: 978-0-8095-7247-2), an ambitious fantasy set in an eponymous metropolis ruled by a consortium of aristocratic houses under matriarchal leadership. Surrounded by patriarchal kingdoms greedy for its treasures, the city-state of Amberlight has retained its independence because of an unstable magical substance called qherrique, found nowhere else in the world, and which only its women can mine and work. Artifacts made from qherrique can be imbued with wondrous—or, if necessary, destructive—powers, and it is the lure of the one, and the threat of the other, that has secured Amberlight its precarious freedom. But the neighboring states, especially militaristic Dhasdein, are determined to conquer the city and humble its proud females.

The men of Amberlight are little more than slaves. The most privileged among them lead lives of pampered decadence as the boy-toys of prominent female leaders, most of whom keep a harem. Male children, and their fathers as well, are callously disposed of. There's no explanation of how this cruelly baroque system, in many ways simply an inversion of patriarchal excesses from our own history, evolved; Kelso isn't interested in providing a sociological exegesis—she's setting up a feminist dystopia as a given condition of her world, like the qherrique itself.

One night, Tellurith, head of one of the ruling houses, finds a gravely injured man lying in the streets of Amberlight. The man, an outsider, has been brutally raped and is suffering from amnesia. For reasons she doesn't fully understand, Tellurith nurses the handsome stranger, whom she names Alkhes, back to

health. In the process, the two fall in love, even though there is suspicion that Alkhes may have entered the city as a spy for one of the patriarchal states.

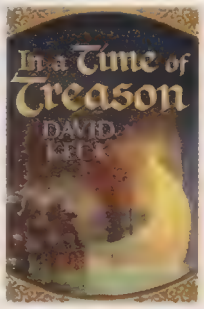
The truth is more complicated, but suffice it to say that Alkhes is not what he seems, and the recovery of his memory leads to grave complications for Tellurith and Amberlight, as well as to a revelation about the true nature of qherrique that is perhaps less of a surprise than the author intends.

Kelso's mannered, poetic style is reminiscent of Samuel R. Delany's highly wrought, impressionistic prose, as is her interest in sexual politics on both macro and micro scales. Also like Delany, her language occasionally overreaches, sacrificing clarity for novelty.

Weirdly at odds with her embrace of a style that proclaims its unconventionality at every turn of phrase, and despite the trappings of feminism that adorn the novel, Kelso's plot hews to the tropes of conventional genre romance. This leads, toward the end of the novel, to situations in which Tellurith, Alkhes, and other characters simply do not behave in believable ways. I was impressed yet ultimately disappointed by *Amberlight*. But I await Kelso's next book with anticipation nonetheless. If this talented writer can approach her characters and plots with half the originality she lavishes on language, the result is sure to be extraordinary.

A Betrayal in Winter (Tor, New York, hardcover, 322 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1341-6), the second volume in the *Long Price Quartet*, continues Daniel Abraham's elegant exploration of a fantasy world modeled in certain respects on medieval Japan. Like the Japan of that era, the city-states of the Khaiem consider themselves to be the acme of civilization, surrounded on all sides by barbarians. Also like the Japan of that era, they are notable for a rigidly hierarchical culture in which highly stylized, even ritualized, forms of politeness put a pretty gloss on less civilized emotions and ambitions that rage under the surface and determine—as perhaps they do everywhere—the course of history. But unlike the Japan of that or any other era, what links the city-states of the Khaiem even more than refined cultural tropes and threats of barbarian invasion is an extremely unique form of magic in which poets bring metaphors to life through their descriptive talents; these living metaphors, called andat, are intelligent, magically potent, and obsessed with the desire to be unmade and thus return to the state of nonbeing from whence they came. As such, the poet who creates an andat must spend the rest of his life locked in an esoteric struggle to the death with his incarnate poem; if he is successful, he will pass the binding on to a successor, who will also inherit the struggle. The ability to create and control the andat is unique to the Khaiem, and it is no exaggeration to state that their existence depends upon it, especially since the so-called barbarians possess superior technologies.

The superb opening volume of the quartet, *A Shadow in Summer*, chronicled the ultimately successful efforts of an andat called Seedless to destroy its creator and its own existence. In doing so, and by entering into a conspiracy with the barbarian nation of Galt, Seedless very nearly destroyed the entire civilization of the Khaiem. He did wreck the career of the apprentice poet slated to take control of him, Maati, and left a deep scar upon the soul of a man named Otah, the fourth son of the ruler of the city of Machi, who abandoned his claim in order to become a poet, and then abandoned that as well.



A Betrayal in Winter picks up the stories of Maati and Otah some fifteen years after the events of *Shadow*. Where that novel, like Hamlet, was "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," *Betrayal* is even more strongly suggestive of another Shakespeare play: *Macbeth*. Or, in keeping with the Japanese theme, Kurosawa's classic version, *Throne of Blood*.

Rulership of Machi is established by a quaint custom: those sons who do not renounce their eligibility must prove their worth by murdering each other until only one survives. That survivor ascends to the throne as the new Khai. But the daughter of the present Khai, Idaan, has ideas of her own. Bloody ideas. And her love affair with Machi's poet, Cehmai, who controls an andat named Stone-Made-Soft—which aptly describes the creature's powers—threatens to do as much or more damage to the Khaiem than even Seedless managed.

As the Dai-Kvo's sons begin to die in mysterious ways, suspicion falls upon Otah, who has adopted a new identity as a courier far from Machi. But his old friendship with Maati is recalled, and Maati is sent to Machi under the assumption that Otah is hiding there. And in short order, Otah's business sends him to Machi, an assignment he cannot refuse without drawing attention to himself. And so the pieces are set in motion for another of Abraham's elaborate, nail-biting, heart-rending chess games.

Another winning sophomore effort is David Keck's ***In a Time of Treason*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 416 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1321-8), the gritty followup to his fine first novel, *In the Eye of Heaven*. That novel introduced the world of Errest and the character of Durand Col, a young hedge knight whose secret love for Deorwen, the beautiful young wife of his liege lord, Lamoric, threatens to make a mockery of his knightly vows and sense of honor. *Treason* opens some months after Lamoric, with Durand's help, thwarted the scheme of another nobleman, Lord Radomor, to usurp the throne. But Radomor's ambition

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still burns strongly, alongside a new desire for revenge against those who defeated and humiliated him.

Summoned to the royal presence in the distant city of Tern Gyre, Lamoric and his men discover a sinister new plot afoot, once again involving Radomor and the mysterious black-clad priests, known as Rooks, who attend him. These genuinely creepy creations possess dark magical abilities that include but are not limited to shapeshifting, and seem to be preparing the way for something even fouler than themselves.

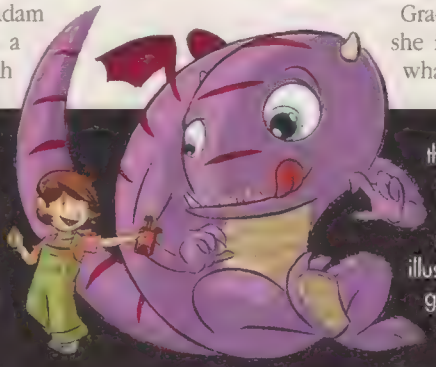
In the first book, Durand was visited by a god known as the Traveler, who implied—as did other eldritch beings in the course of the novel—that Durand is more than he seems, that he has a special destiny, which he may well come to rue, and that he is closely associated somehow with a long-dead hero, or perhaps demigod, named Bruna. These elements, while further developed in *Treason*, are ultimately left for future volumes to resolve, as is the love between Durand and Doerwen, which is no less treacherous, in all senses of the word, for being unconsummated. Keck is a deceptively simple writer: his prose is plain, his dialogue terse, his scenes blunt. But beneath the surface, he's arranging a complex plot with real subtlety and skill. And though his world building is based on more traditional elements than Abraham's, it is equally sophisticated and assured.

To call Christopher Barzak's first novel, ***One for Sorrow*** (Bantam, New York, trade paperback, 310 pp. $12.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-38436-9), a ghost story is to call *Catcher in the Rye*, a book it strongly resembles, a coming-of-age story: the label is accurate as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far. So, yes, there are ghosts in *One for Sorrow*, but the novel is much more than a ghost story. But then, the best ghost stories are.

Fifteen-year-old Adam McCormick lives in a small Ohio town with his dysfunctional family. He's a smart, sensitive kid, the kind of kid who misses nothing and upon whom nothing is lost. The kind of kid whose openness to the world has outstripped his abilities to defend himself against it, and what defenses he has developed inflict more damage on himself and those around him than they manage to ward off from others. We all know that kind of kid. Some of us have been that kind of kid. Some of us are right now.

When a geeky fellow student named Jamie Marks is brutally murdered, Adam exhibits an uncanny identification with this misfit he barely knew, and his empathy is so profound that he becomes able to see and converse with the boy's ghost. Jamie dead appears just as his corpse was found by a neighborhood girl, Gracie Highsmith: naked, bruised, and clearly violated. In order to keep himself with one foot in the world of the living, Jamie has to burn his memories—and quite understandably, the first to go are those associated with his own gruesome murder. So Jamie can contribute nothing to identifying his killer. But that's okay, because this isn't the kind of novel where mysteries are solved.

Gracie can also see Jamie, but she is quick to reject him and what he represents or rather



GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

Three Shadows, Cyril Pedrosa, First Second, New York, trade paperback, 272 pp., $15.95, ISBN: 978-1-59643-239-0. Told using a sparse but evocative drawing style, *Three Shadows* describes the epic journey of a father and son to escape death in the form of shadowy figures that appear on a hill near their house. Through a series of encounters, father and son, along with the reader, begin to understand the nature of the shadows, and the threat they pose. Subtle but with universal themes, this unusual and touching dark fantasy demands your full attention.

Therefore Repent!, Jim Munroe and Salgood Sam, IDW Publishing, San Francisco, CA, trade paperback, pp. 160, $14.99, ISBN: 978-1-60010-146-1. This first foray into graphic novels by the indie innovator Jim Munroe, with able assistance from the illustrator, features a war with angels, bird-headed men, and, after a Rapture-like catastrophe, the appearance of magic on Earth. The main characters, Raven and Mummy, must navigate this new world while also dealing with more personal issues. The art is extraordinarily fluid and the storyline ingenious and sharply intelligent.

Fruits Basket: Ultimate Edition #1, Natsuki Takaya, Tokyopop, New York, hardcover, 400 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-4278-0689-5. Funny and magical, this great new edition of the first two volumes of the best-selling shojo manga features the adventures of orphan Tohru Honda after she is placed with the mysterious Sohma family. What is the Secret of the Zodiac? Just what kind of special powers do her new parents have? Add in strange little critters, romance, and drama and the result is a classic that won Best Manga at the American Anime Awards.

The Demon Ororon, Hakase Mizuki, Tokyopop, New York, hardcover, 848 pp., $19.99, ISBN: 978-1-4278-0732-8. Another handsome omnibus from Tokyopop, this time relating the tale of Chiaki, the orphaned daughter of a human woman and the Archangel Michael. Chiaki's mortal enemy is the demon Ororon. But are they really enemies? Direct, emotional, and sometimes moving, this truly epic rollercoaster of a story displays manga melodrama in all its glory.

Warcraft: Sunwell Trilogy (Ultimate Edition), Richard A. Knaak and Jae-Hwan Kim, Tokyopop, New York, hardcover, 504 pp., $29.99, ISBN: 978-1-4278-0690-1. Fans of the *WarCraft* game will revel in this ultimate edition of the related *Sunwell Trilogy*, which contains an eight-page, full-color prologue by the author, illustrated by Kim, a color art gallery, an artist's sketchbook, an afterword, a full-color unbound pin-up, and an Upper Deck *World of Warcraft* trading card. Oh, yes, and it also includes hundreds of pages of epic fantasy adventure with wonderful evocations of dragons.

Jellaby, Kean Soo, Hyperion Books, New York, hardcover, 144 pp., $18.99, ISBN: 978-142310337-8. When Portia Bennett encounters a purple monster and offers him a tuna fish sandwich, her world—and the monster's—is changed forever. That's the premise of this engaging, funny, and warm-hearted start to a new series aimed at kids ages 10 and up. Rendered mostly in tones of purple, *Jellaby* is a soothing and intelligent story that's been praised by the likes of *Bone*'s Jeff Smith. In an age of so many violent or knee-jerk conflict-driven stories, it's nice to see that something can be entertaining but also sweet.

promises: death and oblivion. But Adam is attracted to these things. Indeed, he feels more than half dead already. It's this harrowing sense of suicidal passivity that Barzak communicates shudderingly well not only through the events of the novel but through the pitch-perfect voice of his narrator, Adam himself.

A bizarre love triangle results, with Gracie and Jamie each struggling to pull Adam away from the other. Adam, meanwhile, drifts along, pulled steadily down by his own anomie, entering more and more into a gray, limbo-like existence almost indistinguishable from death itself.

One for Sorrow is a remarkable story of raw emotion, loss, and sadness that does not deny the attractions of sickness or flinch from the price of recovery. It harkens back to vintage Bradbury as much as it does to Salinger. But it's no nostalgia trip. It's utterly of the moment and in the moment. It's so damn honest that it hurts to read sometimes, even when you're laughing out loud. And though it may seem hard to believe after reading this review, you will be laughing out loud. A lot.

Which brings us to ***Eclipse One*** (Night Shade Books, San Francisco, trade paperback, 263 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-117-1). This opening salvo in a new anthology series succeeds admirably in editor Jonathan Strahan's aim of fashioning a book of stories "where reality [is] eclipsed for a little while with something magical and new." It's encouraging to find an anthology that cuts across genres and is chained to no organizing principle other than an editor's personal taste. Damon Knight and Terry Carr famously edited such series, but they have become rarer in today's publishing environment, which favors the themed anthology. On the strength of the fifteen stories collected here, from a group of today's top writers, Strahan's taste is refreshingly eclectic and his literary judgment acute. Standouts include "Unique Chicken Goes in Reverse," another of Andy Duncan's sly, superbly crafted engagements with figures that loom large in the literary pantheon of the South; "Quartermaster Returns," by Ysabeau S. Wilce, a witty, dusty-dry zombie tale, set in the author's trademark Califa universe, that should be read with a cool beverage in one hand; and "She-Creatures," by Margo Lanagan, in which smugglers in what appears to be eighteenth-century Ireland experience a close encounter with some very weird sisters.

Paul Witcover

Last Dragon, J.M. McDermott, Wizards of the Coast Discoveries, Renton, WA, trade paperback, 390 pp., $17.95, ISBN: 978-0-7869-4857-4.

Relentless, dark, and dangerous, J.M. McDermott's first novel, part of a new line of books from Wizards of the Coast, takes no prisoners. Told in a series of short scenes divided up into longer chapters, *Last Dragon* is narrated by Zhan, a young woman on a revenge quest to find her grandfather, who may be a mass murderer. That the journey

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NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Uninvited, by Amanda Marrone, Simon Pulse, October 2007. Jordan's life has become a nightmare. Every night, as soon as it gets dark, her dead ex-boyfriend appears outside her window, trying to convince her to let him in. Every night, it gets a little harder to ignore him, or to drown out his words with alcohol. And she knows that if she gives in, it'll be the last thing she does. As the story progresses, bits and pieces of the recent past are revealed, showing just how things got to this stage. But can Jordan take back control of her life, rebuild her friendships, discover what's truly important to her, and deal with her nightly visitor once and for all? *Uninvited* is a wonderfully dark story, taking the vampire concept and keeping it at arm's length to restore some of the horror to the genre. Full of complexity and layers, it's thought-provoking and sophisticated. Marrone's clearly a writer to keep an eye on.

Starcross, by Philip Reeve, Bloomsbury, October 2007. Art and Myrtle Mumby are back, in an all-new adventure that's sure to challenge the imagination. Together with their recently returned mother, they travel to the asteroid hotel of Starcross, only to learn that it's a trap. Together and separately, with old friends and new alike, they must battle strange foes, travel through time, and watch out for mind-controlling hats, as they unravel the secrets of Starcross. This is a spectacularly mad jaunt through a brilliantly conceived alternate universe where everything you know about space is wrong, and Britain's conquered the solar system. Between Reeve's brilliant lunacy and David Wyatt's fanciful illustrations, this book is full of adventure, mystery, manners, and imagination. I can't get enough of this series.

Unwind, by Neal Shusterman, Simon & Schuster, November 2007. In a near-future society, unwanted teenagers can be "unwound" for their body parts and organs. Three such teens run away to escape this fate, and eventually hook up with an underground organization dedicated to saving them from a living death. As they struggle to stay alive, they experience love, death, betrayal, horror, and discover some of the horrifying side effects of the unwinding process. Dark and provocative, Unwind plays off of some all-too-real mindsets and a plausible set of outcomes, and contains one of the most disturbing sequences I've ever read. Another excellent offering from Shusterman.

Peter and the Secret of Rundoon, by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, Hyperion, October 2007. Peter Pan is back, in the final volume of this prequel trilogy. This time, he and his friends, including Tink, Molly, and George, must go against the evil Sultan of Rundoon and the vile Lord Ombra, with the fate of the world at stake. Meanwhile, a vicious tribe of warriors invades Never Land, forcing pirates and Mollusks alike to work together to preserve their ways of life. This book sets up the status quo as we next see it in the original *Peter Pan*, explains why the crocodile swallowed a clock, and even introduces the classic Lost Boys. This is another worthwhile entry in the series, full of adventure and mystery, living up to the legend of the boy who won't grow up.

Alcatraz Versus The Evil Librarians, by Brandon Sanderson, Scholastic, October 2007. On his thirteenth birthday, orphan Alcatraz Smedley receives a strange inheritance from his long-lost parents: a bag of sand, which is promptly stolen. Rescued from a gun-toting madman by his previously unknown grandfather, Alcatraz is swiftly dragged into a bizarre adventure involving magical eyewear, evil librarians, hidden lands, talking dinosaurs, and the fate of the world. Is his ability to break things enough to get him through the challenge? Sly and self-aware, this is the start of a great new comedic fantasy series, with an entertaining protagonist and a fun concept. I loved it.

The Tapestry: The Hound of Rowan, by Henry H. Neff, Random House, September 2007. Max McDaniels's world turns upside-down when he discovers his magical destiny, which leads him to enrollment in the secretive Rowan Academy. There, he explores his heritage, takes strange classes, deals with new friends and enemies, and becomes embroiled in a deadly mystery involving missing tapestries and an age-old dark force, requiring him to embrace his potential. Here's a book for those in need of a Harry Potteresque fix, full of magic, action, and Celtic myth. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and will be looking forward to the rest of the series.

Extras, by Scott Westerfeld, Simon Pulse, October 2007. Years after Tally Youngblood changed society, new cultures have sprung up. Aya Fuse lives in a society where fame is everything, and popularity ranking reaps the benefits. With a pathetic ranking down around 450,000, she's desperate to improve her standing, so she infiltrates a strange new clique called the Sly Girls, and in doing so not only uncovers a huge secret, but soon rises to a fame all her own. But will she survive everyone knowing her name? Once again, Westerfeld turns out an intriguing, compelling story, which takes its inspiration from today's obsessions and puts a unique twist on them. I'm never disappointed with his stories, and *Extras* is a great addition to the Uglies series.

The Red Queen's Daughter, by Jacqueline Kosolov, Hyperion, October 2007. In this fascinating alternate historical fantasy, Mary Seymour, orphaned daughter of Queen Katherine Parr (last of Henry VIII's wives) grows up to become a white magician, secretly using various spells and incantations to aid Queen Elizabeth I early in her reign. Court intrigue and the presence of a black magician catapult Mary into a series of adventures that test her abilities and challenge her resolve to never fall in love. This is a beautifully told story that really takes advantage of the setting and historical context to play with social issues and court politics. All that and a striking cover make this a book worth checking out. I'll be looking forward to any sequels that might follow.

changes into something more is unsurprising given the fierce intelligence with which the story is told. The fantasy world evoked by McDermott is often a melange of cultures, with magic personified in the form of personal golems. In one particularly savage, yet offhand scene, a golem slaughters a family. A rare kind of clarity inhabits McDermott's prose through the character of Zhan and the entire novel is a breath of fresh air in the sometimes moldy room that is traditional fantasy fiction. I'm not prepared to say that this novel is a work of genius, but comparisons to Gene Wolfe, in particular, are well-earned and I would not be surprised to see this novel on finalist lists come awards time.

The Man on the Ceiling, Melanie Tem and Steve Rasnic Tem, Wizards of the Coast Discoveries, Renton, WA, trade paperback, 384 pp., $17.95, ISBN: 978-0-7869-4858-1.

A second exciting book from the new Wizards imprint, *The Man on the Ceiling* is an expansion of the original novella of the same name that won the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, and World Fantasy Awards. Happily, in expanding the shorter work Melanie Tem and Steve Rasnic Tem have largely avoided diluting the power of the original. Alternating between various points of view, *The Man on the Ceiling* is as much about family, fear of loss, and the relationships between people as it is about the horror of what might or might not be on the ceiling. The genius of the book is in how it uses the horror as a hook to tell what is largely a set of realistic stories, possibly autobiographical, about the Tems. My only complaint is that in expanding the story the differentiation between points of view becomes more confusing. Still, the results are generally satisfying and Wizards of the Coast should be given fulsome praise for publishing this fascinating book.

Wastelands: Stories of Life After Apocalypse, John Joseph Adams (ed.), Night Shade Books, San Francisco, CA, 352 pp., trade paperback, $15.95, ISBN 978-1-59780-105-8.

When I first heard about this reprint anthology of post-apocalyptic stories, my first reaction was: "That'll make for depressing reading." But the truth is, after sampling the book over a period of days (and I do suggest readers sample rather than read right through), I found *Wastelands* hopeful rather than despairing. I also found it very relevant to the uncertain times in which we live. In fact, many of these stories were written after 2000 and display a full understanding of the worries and real problems that might eventually threaten civilization as we know it. Classics such as George R.R. Martin's "Dark. Dark Were the Tunnels" share space with work by exciting new innovators, such as John Langan's "Episode Seven...," which, in a neat trick is also a comment or correction on Dale Bailey's "The End of the World as We Know It." included earlier in the volume. Other stories by Octavia Butler, Stephen King, Gene Wolfe, and Jonathan Lethem are particularly effective. The only real disappointment was the normally reliable Tobias S. Buckell's woefully underdeveloped "Waiting for the Zephyr." Editor John Joseph Adams has also done a skillful job of introducing and ordering the stories, in addition to providing a useful further reading list.

Paper Cities: An Anthology of Urban Fantasy, *Ekaterina Sedia (ed.), Senses Five, Hoboken, NJ, 288 pp., trade paperback, $14.95, ISBN 978-0-9796246-0-5.*

Featuring an excellent introduction by the always brilliant Jess Nevins, this anthology of original urban fantasy largely delivers on its promise of "mystery, magic, and wonder," with just a few missteps. One of the grittier

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gems in *Paper Cities* is Jay Lake's "Promises," set in the City Imperishable chronicled in his novel *Trial of Flowers*. There's real life and menace in the tale of Girl's hardships, and a true sense of the city existing independent of words on a page. Not so assured are clunky stories by Forrest Aguirre and Hal Duncan, however. Duncan's "The Tower of Morning's Bones" in particular, with its incessant summary and mystical generalizations, soon grates on the nerves. Much better are stories by Richard Parks, Cat Rambo, Ben Peek, and Cathrynne M. Valente. The addition of many new writers, who often find it hard to get published in anthologies, demonstrates that the next generation of fantasists will soon be exploding onto the scene. In general, *Paper Cities* is a worthy addition to any fantasy lover's library.

Of Love and Other Monsters, *Vanda Singh, Aqueduct Press, Seattle, WA, 76pp., trade paperback, $9.00, ISBN 978-1-933500-16-4.*

In this perfect gem of a novella, a teenager named Arun survives a fire to find he has amnesia but also the ability to see into other people's minds. When he comes into contact with Rahul, who has the same power, his

friend Janani, who has helped him regain some semblance of his former life, warns him to flee, even though Rahul may have knowledge that can help Arun. Written in a style that is vivid and yet oddly practical, *Of Love and Other Monsters* is a wise, luminous tale from an accomplished storyteller readers may remember as the author of the young adult novel *Younguncle Comes to Town* (Viking).

The Outlaw Demon Wails, Kim Harrison, Eos, New York, NY, 464pp., hardcover. $24.95. ISBN 978-0-06-078870-4.

Last but not least, if you're looking for something entertaining, fast-paced, and just a lot of fun, you could do worse than Kim Harrison's new novel. *The Outlaw Demon Wails*. I had never read Harrison before and wasn't sure it would be my cup of tea, but I found the novel, with its vampires and demons and snappy contemporary dialogue, to be a real page-turner. This is purportedly a (the?) final chapter in the life of bounty hunter Rachel Morgan, but I was able to follow along very well without having read the other books. Harrison has a real flare for pacing and for plotting.

Jeff VanderMeer

Fantasy Art Now

If you are interested in fantasy art, both classic and new, you most likely visit the many websites that feature collections as well as individual artists. You eagerly await the next *Spectrum* to see the accomplishments of the year. A trip to your local bookstore provides an array of fantasy book covers, and your game shop has the latest card, RPG, and computer games. You might even look through this magazine for the familiar or upcoming artists who illustrate the fiction and inhabit the Gallery features. For a good overview of what's happening in the fantasy art world, editor Martin McKenna has put together a well-rounded collection in **Fantasy Art Now: The Very Best in Contemporary Fantasy Art and Illustration** (Collins Design, New York, 192 pp., hardcover, $29.95).

The book begins with a Foreword by one of fantasy's great artists, Boris Vallejo, who describes the artist's job: "In order to create a good illustration, an artist must have a number of attributes: training, good imagination, and good narrative, among other things. In order to create a good fantasy illustration, the artist has to also be capable of pulling ideas out of thin air, since often they have to paint things that do not exist." The eight chapters cover such subjects as "Brawny Barbarians and Hulky Heroes," "Sirens and Seductresses," and "Fairies and Fey Folk." The contributing artists range from the already established to the new and upcoming who are being published for the first time. The artists' media cover a broad spectrum from oils and watercolors to computer-generated illustrations.

It is obvious, from looking through the book, that digital art has come a long way from its beginnings. In many cases, one has to refer to the caption to determine the medium used. As McKenna says in his Introduction, "As the digital medium matures, it's gaining something of its own aesthetic, as previous new media have done before it. The digital artwork in this collection heralds the new wave of contemporary creators and their endlessly adaptable new medium: the computer."

The book is a useful resource for those who purchase fantasy art and for fans as well. Captions provide the artists' websites and a directory in the back of the book lists contact information for each contributor. And for aspiring fantasy artists, the creators of each piece offer insight into their inspirations and techniques in the captions.

Fantasy Art Now is a worthwile addition to your library, whether you are an artist, a writer, or a fan.

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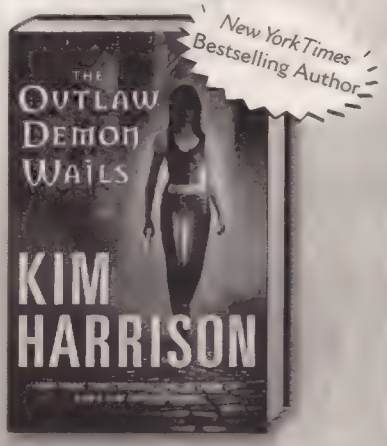
WILLIAM MORROW

The Outlaw Demon Wails
Kim Harrison



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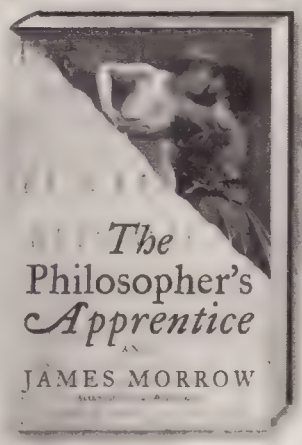

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WILLIAM MORROW

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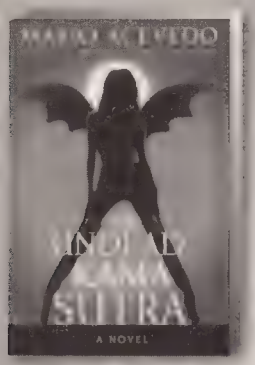
Mario Acevedo



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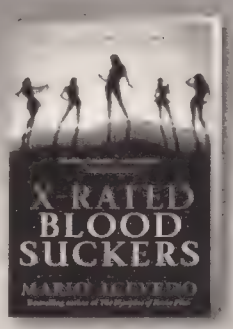
Mario Acevedo



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BY DELIA SHERMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES VESS

A Gift from a Spring

Magic cannot be tamed or captured, and neither can love, much as we'd like to think otherwise.

In the southwest of France is a province that looks like an illustration for a fairy tale. There are high, frowning cliffs with gray stone fortresses like extinguished dragons coiled around their summits. There are narrow, bright, running rivers and steep, rocky fields striated with grape vines and deep, mysterious woods full of moss-grown rocks and small, unexpected springs bubbling up into shaded pools. It is called the Lot.

By the logic of aesthetics, the Lot should be rich in gold or diamonds or magical treasure. Existing as it does in the real world, it is rather poor than otherwise. Its chief products are a coarse, tannic wine that doesn't travel well, lavender oil, walnuts, ducks, and legends. Once, the Lot was part of the Aquitaine that the infamous Queen Eleanor brought to England as her dowry. Now it is full of holidaying Brits pretending they never lost it to the French 550 years ago.

Although I am a Brit myself, I did not go to the Lot looking for a holiday, but for work—paying work, work that would buy me another six months worth of paint and canvas so that I could continue to pursue the indefinable, magical something that would turn me into a successful artist.

I was up in town for a gallery opening. Not mine, needless to say. My career had reached something of a crossroads that spring, with no clear signpost in sight.

In art school, I'd always done best in drawing classes: still-life, figure drawing, portraits. My adviser had encouraged me to take up portraiture, but I hadn't the temperament for dealing with temperamental sitters. I preferred landscape, but he'd pronounced my mountains and bosky dells and gnarled trees far too literal-minded to qualify as fine art.

"It would do as illustration, I suppose," he said. "Children's books, possibly. Although your line is old-fashioned even for that—Rackham and Crane written all over it. Can't you do something a little more modern?"

Heaven knows I wanted to. I loved the cool intellectualism of the Minimalists, the passionate iconoclasm of the Abstract Impressionists. In pursuit of my goal, I redoubled my studies of Twentieth Century Art. I haunted the Tate Modern. I retired my books on Gustave Moreau, the Pre-Raphaelites, and, yes, Arthur Rackham, in favor of books on Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, and Rothke. I cropped my hair and wore black. I tried thinking about the military/industrial complex and capitalism while I tore brown paper and arranged the pieces on purposefully spattered canvases. I painted anatomized fruit and canvases titled *Study in Blue, with Ovals.*

These paintings weren't awful. I'd sold *Study in Blue* at the All-Devon Christmas Arts Fair, and there was a gallery in Moreton Hampstead that had expressed interest in my fruit series. The only problem was that every canvas I'd done felt like a sophisticated exercise in paint-by-numbers. I was getting the moves down, but I was gradually losing heart.

It was in an state of acute artistic malaise, therefore, that I took the train up to town from Exeter to attend the opening of a group show of my art school classmates at a small gallery in Clerkenwell. I might as well have stayed home in Devon: I was too blind with jealousy to see the paintings clearly. I wouldn't have seen my old friend Sia either, if she hadn't rushed up and embraced me.

"You look like you need a drink," she said, looking into my face. "I do."

We repaired down the street to the Chop and Crown and settled in for a comfortable evening of drinking and whingeing, just like old times. By the time we'd killed most of a bottle of the cheap red plonk that was all we could afford, Sia knew all there was to know about the disaster that was my life.

"Poor Whittier." She poured the last of the plonk into my glass. "No wonder you're getting squirrelly, cooped up in that cottage all the time. You need a change. Why don't you go to France?"

"Portugal's cheaper," I said. "And I can't afford to go there either."

Sia patted my hand. "I know, dear. I know. Will you just listen for a minute without interrupting? If you don't like what I've got to say, you can go back to venting and I won't say another word. I promise."

I never quite know how to respond to that kind of comment, so I lifted my glass in an encouraging gesture and slouched back in my chair.

"You've heard of Ondine Delariviére, right?" she said.

I nodded. Ondine Delariviére was famous. She'd been a prima ballerina in the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1950s and 1960s, beloved as Dame Margot Fonteyn despite refusing to dance anything remotely modern or tour outside of continental Europe. After 1965, she began turning down European tours too. But she was so incandescently light and fluid in her movements, so enchanting to watch, that balletomanes from Europe and even North America were more than happy to make the pilgrimage to Paris to see her. Productions of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* in which she danced the title roles sold out virtually the moment they were announced.

And then she vanished.

The tabloids had hinted at a drug habit, bone cancer, crippling arthritis, a shameful love affair, madness. For six months, the mystery of Ondine Delariviére's disappearance obsessed the masses, and then some politico got his picture in the tabloids with a floozy and she was forgotten.

"What happened was, she got married," Sia said, "to a director named Peter Collingsworth, whose specialty was gorgeous, edgy historical recreations. Good looking, too, and maybe fifteen years younger than Ondine. She met him when the Opera Garnier got him in to advise on *Les Sylphides.* They fell in love and ran away together."

She paused long enough for me to venture a question. "How did the tabloids miss that story?"

"There are no paparazzi in the Lot, I guess. That's where they ran to—a valley in the most unfashionable part of southwestern France. It seems Ondine had inherited a sheep farm there, with a lovely fieldstone farmhouse, plenty of barns and outbuildings and fields and woods around it for privacy. She and Peter turned the dairy and the granary and the farmhouse attic into dormitories and the barns into rehearsal and performance space and opened a summer school for the performing arts for kids. They're still there. Peter teaches acting and stagecraft. Ondine teaches dance and movement."

"And nobody knows?" I asked, not so much because I was curious, but because I'm fond of Sia and didn't want to seem rude.

"The parents of their students know, of course—that's why the place is successful. There's no advertising, just word of mouth. The truth is, an old dancing teacher's life is just not as gossip-worthy as a prima ballerina's."

I set down my empty glass. "Very interesting, Sia. What does it have to do with me?"

"I worked there last summer." She cast me a significant glance. "They pay very well."

"I don't know anything about the theater."

"You don't have to." Sia leaned earnestly over the stained table top. "The Collingsworths are brilliant teachers, but they have no more business sense than a pair of kittens. They need someone to keep the books, make sure the boulanger is paid, call the plumber, change the fuses. You're good at the practicalities of life: you could do it with your eyes closed."

"I don't doubt it. But why would I want to?"

Sia sat back. "It would give you free room and board for the summer. A change of scene, which you sorely need. Time to paint, think, sort yourself out." She smiled at me. "Look at it this way, Whittier. What have you got to lose?"

In that wood there was no sense of background, only fore- and middle ground: a wall of trunks and leaves shielding some impenetrable mystery.

Had it been anyone but Sia advising me to offer myself as a general factotum at a theatrical summer camp set up in a former sheep farm, I'd have handed them their head on a salver. As it was, I reminded myself that I didn't have so many close friends that I could afford to lose one. "My dignity," I said. "My pride. A summer's worth of work."

"You'll have plenty of time to work," Sia said. "I hate to be blunt, but really, Whittier, do you have a choice?"

That was indeed the question. I was pretty much entirely out of money. No money means no colors, no canvas, no brushes to paint with, no studio to paint in. I wrote down Peter Collingsworth's name on a bar napkin and when I got home to Devon, I wrote him a letter inquiring whether he needed a summer bookkeeper and office manager and sent it off to La Vielle Ferme de la Source at St. Martin le Pauvre, Lot, France.

A short time later, I received two letters. One was from Collingsworth offering me a job at La Vielle Ferme de la Source. The other was from my landlord, threatening me with eviction for nonpayment of rent. As the salary Collingsworth mentioned seemed adequate and the duties reasonable, I swallowed my pride and wrote by return post accepting his offer with gratitude.

Thus I found myself, at the beginning of June, on the platform of the Cahors train station, where I was accosted by a short, wiry, grizzle-bearded man with dark curly hair.

"Peter Collingsworth," he said, energetically pumping my hand.

"And you must be Desdemona Whittier. Welcome to our little family, Desdemona."

I winced. "Please, call me Whittier."

He dropped my hand as though I'd stung him. "My Christian name's something of a trial to me," I said apologetically. "I shed it when I went to school, and now my mother is the only person who expects me to answer to it."

Collingsworth smiled cautiously. "Whittier, then, by all means. Are those your traps? Splendid. You must be ravenous, but I hope you'll last until we get home. Madame Fabre is cooking up a welcome feast—you've no objection to rabbit, I trust?"

After assuring him I was completely comfortable with rabbit, I couldn't think of another word to say. Luckily, Collingsworth seemed happy to shoulder the whole burden of conversation. In the course of the hour it took to drive from Cahors to St. Martin le Pauvre, he regaled me with accounts of Madame Fabre's culinary genius, the excellence of her husband's wine, his own ideas for the school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and the presence on the property of a spring—"La Source" of the farm's name—which was reputedly both haunted and sacred.

"Of course, it's nothing of the sort," he said as he swerved his little green Citroën sedan around the backside of a cow calmly eating weeds with her forefeet in a ditch. "It's very obviously man-made, with dressed stone sides and pipes and things. Ondine says there's been a wash house there since the year dot. The structure is long gone, but we still use the basin as the camp laundry."

He downshifted suddenly and turned onto a tiny, unpaved lane between two sloping fields. The Citroën bounced over the rocky, rutted surface, the motor roaring in first gear as the lane plunged upward through a shady wood.

Trees and shrubbery crowded close to the path and dragged along the sides of the car. Leafy branches overhead screened the sky and dimmed the light. In that wood there was no sense of background, only fore- and middle ground: a wall of trunks and leaves shielding some impenetrable mystery.

When we broke free of the trees and into the light again, I had to squint against the glare of casement windows and scarlet trumpet vines, fever-bright against the soft umber of a stone farmhouse, stolid and practical. There was an equally stolid barn across the path to its left and we drove between them, pulling up beside a courtyard flanked by the house and two more barns, all built of the same richly glowing stone.

I clambered out of the car and looked out over the bright prospect of field and wood behind me.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Whittier. *Bien venue* to La Source!"

I turned toward the light, silvery voice and saw Ondine Collingsworth, neé Delariviére.

I recognized her at once, from the famous Avedon photo of her as Giselle. There was the broad forehead, the pointed chin, the thin, chiseled lips, the extraordinarily wide-set dark eyes. Her slight, strong, upright body was clothed in a practice dress made of some soft, green stuff that flowed over her dancer's limbs like water. Had I been a portrait painter, I'd have been begging to paint her.

A cloud passed over the sun. My eyes, no longer dazzled, noted that the line of her throat and chin was ever so slightly blurred, her complexion lightly veiled with tiny lines. Belatedly, I remembered that Ondine Collingsworth must be at least 70 years of age, if not more. She certainly did not look it.

Ondine came closer, extending her slender hand. I was about to take it when Peter Collingsworth gathered her into his arms and began murmuring into her hair as though he'd just got home from the moon instead of Cahors.

Above his shoulder, the moss-brown eyes met mine. She winked at me. Startled, I smiled, then turned away to extract my luggage from the Citroën's boot.

That night, unpacking my gear, I felt more cheerful than I'd felt in some time. I was full of excellent rabbit fricassee, fresh-picked vegetables, and rough, young wine. My employers had exerted themselves to be agreeable, and I found myself inclined to like them. Ondine was a conversational butterfly, fluttering from subject to subject in charmingly accented English. Collingsworth, less voluble in his wife's presence, encouraged her reminiscences. When he said good night, I thought how lucky they were to have found each other.

My room had been converted from the farm's old bread oven, with bed and desk and storage all built into the thick stone walls. Windows over the bed and desk looked out into the wood. I even had my own external door through which I could slip out if I wanted without anyone being the wiser.

That first night, I stood on the threshold to watch the moon rise through the treetops and listen to the resonant hou-hou of an owl waking in the depths of the wood. Here was peace, I thought. Here I could paint something that really mattered.

The next day, reality set in.

After a breakfast of ripe apricots and yogurt, Collingsworth and Ondine ushered me into La Source's basement office. It was a dank, dark room situated between the communal toilets on one side and the storage-and-wine cellar on the other. Someone—Ondine undoubtedly—had done what could be done with whitewash and framed watercolors, bright cushions and vases of flowers. A little clay plaque soaked with oil of lavender struggled against the pervasive odor of drains, stale wine, and mold.

"Sorry about the mess," Collingsworth said apologetically. "Sia left it shipshape last fall, but you know how it is. One turns one's back, and entropy takes over."

I surveyed the drifts of unopened envelopes, the tottering pile of ledgers, the cancelled checks hugger-mugger across the desk. "Perhaps you need a professional bookkeeper," I said.

"We have an accountant," Ondine said. "In Paris. He doesn't like the country."

"Ring him by all means," Collingsworth added. "He'll fill you in on what needs to be done. Well. We'll leave you to it, then, shall we?"

I sank into the desk chair and turned on the desk lamp. Behind me, Ondine cleared her throat. "Chéri, tell her about the washing machine."

Her voice was heavy with meaning. Clearly, the washing machine was an uncomfortable subject. Collingsworth certainly sounded uncomfortable enough when he said, "Ah, yes. The washing machine. Ondine thinks we're sadly behind the times, washing our linen as our ancestors did, in the clear, pure water from the earth."

"That's not it at all, chéri. As you very well know."

The words were innocuous enough, but the steel in her voice told me there was more going on here than met the eye. I waited, with interest, to see how Collingsworth would respond.

He smoothed his beard nervously. "As you very well know," he said, "it's just not feasible. The effect on the ground water, the plumbing, the draw on the electrical system—we've been over it all a thousand times. It's just not on, darling. I'm sorry."

He didn't sound particularly sorry. In fact, he sounded smug. Which annoyed me so much that I broke my own rule about not meddling in other people's business. "What a coincidence," I said brightly. "My aunt just bought a new washing machine. It's the latest thing—energy efficient, low-flow, ultra ecological. You can install it nearly anywhere, I think."

If I'd pulled the machine itself out of the pocket of my shorts, I couldn't have gotten a more dramatic reaction. Collingsworth's lips thinned to nothing and his cheeks flushed a deep and angry scarlet. Ondine, who had been looking every minute of her age, dropped thirty years in a second. She smiled, a crescent moon of pure joy. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed. She clasped her hands in front of her breast like a girl. *"Quelle merveille!"* she breathed. "What a marvel! Peter, do you hear?"

"It'll cost the earth to bring in and hook up properly," Collingsworth grumbled. "Some German machine, I'll be bound, finicky as an old maid, forever breaking down and needing parts that no one stocks."

"You don't know that, Peter," Ondine snapped. "You just want it to be so. Mademoiselle Whittier will find out the truth of the matter. Will you not, Mademoiselle Whittier?"

Collingsworth glared at me. "You do that, Whittier, by all means. Just keep in mind that we keep this place going on a shoestring. A thickish shoestring, but not one to take an undue strain. I'm not running the risk of losing all we've worked so hard to build because my wife wants a washing machine, forsooth!"

Astonished by this sudden squall, I simply nodded. Ondine brought her hand to her mouth in the attitude of a woman betrayed. Her husband reached out to her and she bolted past him out of the office.

"Damn and blast," Collingsworth said ruefully. "The cat's among the pigeons now. You should have held your tongue."

"I didn't know I had to," I said. Having no desire to be sacked my first day on the job, I tried to keep my tone neutral.

"I'm just trying to protect her," Collingsworth said defensively. "Research the damn thing, by all means, now you've got her hopes up. Just remember when you discover it can't be done, you're the one who will have to tell her."

I had intended to begin research on the washing machine question immediately. Instead, I spent the day separating bills, business letters, receipts, and checks for tuition from photographs, letters from former students, newspapers, dance and theater magazines, old programs, masks, and notes for old productions pulled for reference from the careful files Sia had made last summer and left to compost on the desk and the floor with sprays of leaves, sun-whitened bones, curiously shaped stones, and feathers. By evening, I'd unearthed both the telephone and the accountant's name and phone number, and counted it a good day's work. I hardly knew what to say to my employers at dinner, but they were so full of lesson plans and set designs for *The Dream* that I doubt they noticed my silence.

The next day the students arrived—thirty artistic adolescents of both sexes and a spread of ages from twelve to eighteen. Classes began the following day, effectively separating me from the Collingsworths except at meals. My mornings were spent in the basement office among the receipts, bills, and bank books. I sorted, I filed, I added and subtracted. I spent hours on the phone to the accountant in Paris.

In the afternoons, I sat in my bread oven retreat, listening to Ondine teaching ballet in the barn next door.

She was indeed a brilliant teacher, if not a kind one. She teased, she ridiculed, she exhorted, she goaded. Girls were always running into the bathroom that faced my door in floods of tears, bathing their faces, and emerging, scarlet-eyed, to try again. Sometimes I crept up to what had once been the hayloft and looked down on them bending and tossing and unfolding their slender bodies in solemn unison while Ondine wove among them, tapping here a wrist, there an outflung foot or knee into an attitude of greater grace, greater strength, greater fluidity. What she was looking for, I realized, was a kind of controlled abandon, and she was not, on the whole, finding it.

Neither was I.

Midsummer in the Lot means enough light to paint by until nearly midnight. I set up my easel outside my private woodland door and tried to capture my impressions of La Vielle Ferme de la Source in paint. I had a composition in mind: a still, bright center (that was Ondine), embraced, upheld, perhaps confined by something darker, more active (that was Collingsworth), surrounded by a series of shapes, colors, movements that both were and were not the trees, the fields, the students, Monsieur and Madame Fabre and all the glorious rest of it.

And once a week, on Saturday mornings, I stripped my bed, bundled my towels and dirty clothes into a pillowcase, and hauled it down to Ondine's spring for washing.

The first week, Collingsworth mustered the whole camp in the courtyard and led us in procession to the spring. We'd never have found it on our own. The path looked no different from any of the other paths that snaked through La Source's little patch of woodland. Clutching my pillowcase, I picked a rather unsteady way around rocks and over moss-slick roots and fallen branches nobody'd bothered to clear away. The artistic adolescents crashed through the undergrowth until we came to a rocky bottleneck, through which we squeezed single-file, emerging into a park-like glade studded with trees. Off to one side was a grassy bank topped with trees and ferns and thorny bushes, studded with the mossy ruins of a stone building: La Source de La Vielle Ferme.

I can't say I thought it particularly beautiful or haunted. The fountain itself was a hole, perhaps three meters square, flanked by two semicircular pipes through which clear water trickled into a small square basin. A notch in the rim fed the long pond where we were to wash our clothes. The water was murky and spotted with vivid green duckweed.

Collingsworth demonstrated how to pound the soap into the cloth, rinse it in the pond, then wring out the sopping, clinging sheets in pairs. He helped me wring my sheets, and I helped him wring his. There was laughing and splashing and semi-accidental dunkings. Ondine was not present.

That evening, I dug out my sketching block and drew La Source, minus the screaming adolescents and the laundry. Then, as if compelled, I drew the view from the window over the desk and the lavender bush planted by the back door. From then on, I divided my free time between my abstract oil—my real work—and sketching. Telling myself that it couldn't hurt for me to keep my hand in, I sketched everything: the students hanging sheets in the drying yard or practicing combinations in front of the flyblown mirror in the barn; Ondine teaching, presiding over dinner in the long barn, sewing straight-backed on the veranda, ignoring her husband, who sat beside her in a deck chair and watched her with hungry eyes.

I both loved and hated these sketches of Ondine. On the one hand, I thought they caught something of her grace, her mischief, her calm, even (taken in series) her trick of looking old as the hills one moment and young as a flower in bud the next. On the other hand, they were useless. They were old fashioned, sentimental. They weren't art. And yet I couldn't stop making them.

And every morning, I doggedly continued to organize the office, research washing machines, and exercise my A-level French on every appliance dealer, electrician, and plumber within a 100-kilometer radius of St. Martin le Pauvre. When I'd amassed a collection of brochures, estimates, and proposals, I put them together with the balance sheet I'd prepared, plus an article or two on the ecological benefits of a properly drained low-flow washing machine, and presented the whole to the Collingsworths one evening after dinner.

"But this is wonderful!" Ondine exclaimed, turning over the glossy pages of one brochure. "So beautiful and so economical! You will order one immediately."

Collingsworth snorted. "You will do no such thing, Whittier. Things are just hotting up with *The Dream*. I don't want the kiddies any more distracted than they already are."

"It will not be a distraction, chéri." Ondine's voice was pure seduction. "See here, where Monsieur le Plombier estimates two days of work only, to set everything in place."

"Two days!" Collingsworth laughed. "Add a week and 100 euros at least, and you'd be nearer the mark." He turned a ferrety gaze on me. "You seem like a sensible sort, Whittier. Surely you know these estimates are fairy tales?"

I protested. Ondine coaxed, then sulked. Collingsworth would not be moved. At the end of a solid hour of fruitless discussion, he picked up his empty glass and rose. "We've scheduled the readings for Titania/Hyppolita tonight, my dear," he said. "Doesn't do to keep the kiddies waiting. Bad for discipline."

For a moment, I thought she'd tell him where he could put his discipline, and perhaps the play as well—she certainly looked angry enough, all flushed and bright and stiff-backed. But she simply folded her lips tight and swept past him.

The lines of battle were drawn.

As *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was cast and rehearsals began, the young actors had ample opportunity to observe the disturbance that permeates a kingdom when its rulers are at daggers drawn.

Nobody knew what the fight was about, exactly, but they took sides anyway. The dancers supported her; the actors supported him. The students in charge of lights and tech called a plague on both their houses and showed disturbing signs of making up to me. It was all profoundly uncomfortable.

I couldn't figure out why on earth Collingsworth was so dead set on denying his clearly much-beloved wife something it would be so very easy for him to give her. Observing him, I wouldn't have said that he was in general clutchfisted or unkind or unreasonable. And yet there he was, out-Scrooging Scrooge. It was beyond comprehension.

Tackling him on the subject led only to discussions that went round and round and ended up nowhere. Out of pure frustration, I did a watercolor of the fountain as it might be if it were left in peace: green, clear, fern-bordered, with lilies floating on its surface and a bright shadow beneath that I had meant for the reflection of a cloud but looked a little like a woman's face.

And still, as the weather grew hotter, we trooped down to the spring on Saturday mornings, rubbed soap into our laundry, rinsed it in sullen green water, and hung it in the sheltered bamboo grove to dry.

Late one blazing Saturday afternoon, I went to rescue my personal laundry before the drying-yard was overrun with students rushing to bring in their linen before dinner. As I approached the gate, I heard Collingsworth's querulous tenor and Ondine's aggrieved soprano within. I hesitated a moment, then edged silently between the tall, rustling stalks and listened.

"You promised," Ondine was insisting. "As soon as it became possible, you said."

"That has yet to be established." Collingsworth sounded insufferably stuffy.

"It has been established. Whittier has established it. I do not understand why you refuse to accept it. I have kept my end of the bargain, have I not?"

This last was said with real pain, like a small child discovering that the world is unfair. But there was pain in Collingsworth's voice, too. "You've been a good wife to me, Ondine. I've been happy. We've been happy. Why can't we just go on as we have been for a little longer?"

"How long? A month? A year? Until you die of old age? Things are no longer what they were, Peter, and nothing you say can make them so. You lied to me. You're lying to me now. I will not stay with a man who lies to me."

"I'd never lie to you, Ondine."

There was a silence broken by the brisk smack of flesh on flesh, a grunt (Collingsworth) and a sob (Ondine). I hurriedly extracted myself from the bamboo and backed away from the gate just as Ondine thrust it open and strode toward the house, her face set with fury.

Little as I was liking Collingsworth just then, I could not but pity him.

This state of affairs could not go on. A fire smoldering in a pile of damp leaves will burst into flame as soon as it has a little air to feed it. You wouldn't have said there was much air abroad the night everything exploded. It was hot and dry and breathless, the latest in a procession of hot, dry nights punctuated by ever hotter and more breathless days. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was progressing poorly, lines and blocking both lost to the mind-numbing heat. The dancers stumbled and strained and complained of dizziness. One of them fainted altogether in the midst of her fouettés and sprained her wrist. Madame Fabre refused to turn on the stove, and we supped lightly on bread, cheese, salad, and slivers of cold duck breast washed down with blood-warm rosé.

When we'd eaten, the students began to clatter the plates onto trays. Collingsworth drained his glass and wiped sweat from his face. "Damn hot tonight," he said. "The hell with your old washing machine, Ondine. What we really need is a swimming pool."

Ondine hadn't spoken directly to her husband since the incident in the drying yard, but she spoke now. "You're drunk, Peter."

"So I am, Ondine. But mostly I'm hot. Wait, we have a pool. Cold as be-damned, too. How about a nice dip?"

"It's full of soap scum," Ondine said, her lip curled with distaste. "And duckweed."

All around us, the wood was still, the soft trickle of the fountain like a sleeper's long-drawn breathing, the paper passing through her hands like the rustle of bed sheets.

"What's wrong with duckweed?" Collingsworth asked. "It's a plant, isn't it? Natural and all that? Come swimming with me, Ondine, please. For old times sake."

It seemed a reasonable enough suggestion, given the heat and the natural chill of the fountain's water. I'd paddled my feet in the runoff more than once the past few hot days, and thought nothing of it. But there was something in Collingsworth's voice, some note of bravado or challenge, that drew my eyes first to him and then to Ondine.

"How dare you," she said in a harsh whisper more shocking, somehow, than a shout. "How dare you speak of 'old times'? You are a fool and a liar, Peter Collingsworth. But until this moment, I had not realized that you were cruel."

Medusa could not have done a more thorough job of paralyzing us. The students and I were stone-faced and astonished, eyes fixed on our hands, our neighbors, our plates, anywhere but on Ondine's incandescent fury and Peter Collingsworth's misery.

"Not cruel," he said, bewildered. "Surely not that. I only want what's best for us."

Ondine stood up. "You may all go to bed, now," she said. "It is late."

Obediently, quietly, disproportionately shocked, we went to our rooms like scolded children—Collingsworth, too, his arms dangling helpless at his thighs as he crossed the courtyard and mounted the stone steps to the house.

I retired to the bread oven, too wrought up to sleep. I lit my entire stock of candles, set them on the deep window ledges and alcoves, and spread my summer's work across the bed and the desk and examined it thoroughly.

The sketches weren't bad. Literal-minded as ever, but lively enough. They'd do for a book titled *A Summer at La Source*, or *What I Did at the Holidays*.

The painting, on the other hand, was dreadful: a muddy, incomprehensible, unreadable, ugly mess. I'd overworked it. The thing to do was let it go, start over on a clean canvas once I'd thought a little more clearly about what I wanted it to say about La Source.

The problem, of course, was that I'd put everything I felt about La Source into the sketches and watercolor of the fountain I'd painted to show Collingsworth why he should buy his wife a washing machine.

My chest heaved and huffed. Caught between laughter and tears, I came out with something like a strangled bark, harsh and hard on the throat. It was hopeless. I was not the kind of artist I wanted to be.

Shuffling the sketches into a pile, I added the watercolor, and stacked them all on the canvas. Then I tucked a box of matches in my pocket, gathered the ungainly bundle in my arms, and set out

through my private door and into the wood.

Of course I went to the fountain. There was nowhere else to go where a bonfire such as I intended would not begin a conflagration.

There was a moon, full or close to it, which gave me enough light to navigate by. Awkwardly, I negotiated rocks and roots, making, I'm sure, a racket that would wake the dead, stumbling at last onto the mossy turf of the fountain glade.

And there I saw Ondine, her pale hair unbound and glistening in the moonlight, perched on the edge of the upper basin.

I stopped dead, my work clutched to my chest as if to keep my hammering heart from leaping out.

"Desdemona," she said, soft but commanding.

"Whittier," I said weakly. "I prefer to be called ..."

"I do not give a good God-damn what you prefer," she said. "Come here, Desdemona, and stop acting like a schoolgirl."

I came. I was angry and embarrassed in more ways than I can tell, but I came.

In a fluid movement, she turned to face me, her white feet peeping from her nightgown's white hem, looking ridiculously, unbelievably young.

"Sit down," she ordered me. "Show me."

"It's dark," I said.

"All the better."

Never argue with drunks or nuts, my father taught me. So I laid the stack of paper and canvas at her feet and sat and forced myself to watch her face as she went through them. I couldn't see the art, of course. I shouldn't have been able to see Ondine, either. But I could, quite clearly.

She was wearing her teacher-face, calm, unrevealing, entirely concentrated, her eyes glittering in the tricky moonlight as they scanned each sketch, each watercolor and oil study in turn, and laid it aside.

My pulse fluttered nervously. All around us, the wood was still, the soft trickle of the fountain like a sleeper's long-drawn breathing, the paper passing through her hands like the rustle of bed sheets. In the midst of all this peace, I felt like an alarm clock set to go off much too early.

Before I quite exploded, Ondine looked up at me. "Why did you bring these here, Desdemona?"

It did not occur to me to prevaricate. "To burn them." It didn't sound quite the considered and adult decision I had thought it, so I went on: "It's no good, you see. I've put a lot of time and energy into becoming an artist, and I'm not getting any better. I'm not getting any younger, either. It's time I just admit that I'm a dauber, a Sunday painter, a hobbyist, dispose of the embarrassing evidence, and get on with my life."

"Better at what?"

She didn't sound as if she especially cared, which perversely made me more eager to make her understand. "Come now, you've seen the work," I said. "The drawings aren't terrible, but I'm not at all interested in churning out pretty landscapes for the tourist market."

Ondine lifted a blurry sheet I could just identify as my watercolor of the fountain. The moonlight caught the shape in the water, gave it features I'd never intended, turned it into a face, wide-eyed and mischievously smiling. "Like this, you mean?"

"Exactly like that."

Her gleaming white foot stirred the train wreck that I'd intended to be my masterpiece. "And what of this?"

"What of it?" I echoed bitterly. "I put my heart and soul into that, not to mention everything I've ever learned about technique. It's crap. Utter, complete, thorough-going, bone-deep crap. I can't stand the sight of it. I can't stand the sight of any of it."

"And so you're going to burn your heart and your soul and go back to England and do what? Design bookkeeping systems for impractical artists? Pursue a certificate in accountancy?"

Her voice pricked me like a silver needle. When it became clear I could not answer, she stretched, shaking back her long white hair, and came to her feet in a single, smooth, dancerly surge.

"Are you going to burn your art or are you not? Because if you are, you'd best get on with it. I'd advise you to gather enough stones for a hearth first. You don't want the fire to spread."

Squatting ungracefully among my scattered sketches, I gaped up at her silhouette, black against the electric blue sky.

"You'd be a fool to do it," she went on. "I've loved many artists. I know true art when I see it, and I see it here. If you, however, cannot tell a baby from bathwater, there is nothing more to be said."

Suddenly, she looked old and tired, her slim body exhaustedly collapsed in upon itself. I was as shocked by the change in her as I was by her words, which left me as confused as I'd been in my life.

"I'm going to bed," she said. "Give the watercolor of the spring to me. You should keep the oil yourself."

"Why?"

"To remind you of who you are not."

In the event, I didn't burn anything. I sat brooding in the glade until the birds woke up, then retrieved every scrap and stumbled back to the bread oven. Not being one who can function very well on no sleep, I did not feel up to dealing with my employers and their crochets. But I wasn't actually ill, so I didn't feel I could ask for a day off. What would I have done with it, anyway?

Collingsworth wasn't at breakfast, but Ondine was, looking like an active woman of seventy-odd who'd enjoyed a night's unbroken slumber. She smiled at me with absent courtesy and handed me a brioche as our moonlit interview had never happened.

When I took my coffee down to the cellar office, I found Collingsworth at the desk. My washing machine file was open in front of him, and tucked into the frame of the floral still life over the desk was my watercolor of the fountain.

"You've done an excellent job, Whittier," he said without turning around. "It's all as clear as glass. I'd be an idiot not to install a washing machine at La Source. I was an idiot not to do it long ago. Get on the horn, there's a good girl, and order us up one today. I'd like to get the thing installed as soon as possible, work out the bugs, release the spring into the wild, as it were, and move on."

It was so utterly unexpected, so sudden—and I was so sleepy—that I didn't have the first idea how to respond. I stood in the door gaping. "It was this that did it," he said, gesturing to the watercolor. "I don't know how you know, but you do. And now you've reminded me, I can't pretend anymore. I don't know whether to thank you or sack you."

A week later, the washing machine arrived. Installing it was a five-act drama, peopled by a large cast of plumbers, electricians, masons, building inspectors, and petty bureaucrats. They enacted scenes of comedy, melodrama, and even near-tragedy, and then they bowed and departed, leaving behind a concrete slab with a white enamel box on it, crowned with dials and displays.

The washing machine was the last word in energy and water efficiency and boasted an instruction manual an inch thick, written by illiterate engineers whose first language, at a guess, was Medieval Icelandic. By the time I'd figured out how to work it, I hated the sight of it more than

> Some part of me knew she wouldn't surface within a normal breath-holding span, that she was as comfortable under water as in the air—more comfortable, water being her native element.

tongue can tell—more than Collingsworth, I think, although he had thrown himself so completely into *Dream* rehearsals that nothing else seemed to matter.

Still, he was present for the grand washing Ondine organized next laundry day—a real production, with a ceremonial procession of maidens bearing sheets and towels to the flower-garlanded appliance.

The whole thing ought to have been squirmingly precious, but it was actually rather splendid, in a Dionysian sort of way. The maidens stuffed the sheets into the washer, Collingsworth measured in an anxious ounce of low-sudsing, biodegradable detergent, and I unlatched the agitator and set the dial. Ondine pressed the "On" button with a dramatic flourish and we all held our breaths as the washer began to hiss and churn. Once we were sure it wasn't going to explode or overflow, the linen-bearers and their acolytes dispersed to play tag in the courtyard.

"How long's it likely to take, Whittier?" Collingsworth asked.

"Forty-five minutes," I said. "Counting the spin cycle."

He studied the gently chugging machine, an expression of profound sadness on his good-humored face utterly at odds with the object, the day, the occasion. "The end of an era, what?" he said, artificially jocund. "Keep an eye on it will you, Whittier? I'm going to run Titania and Oberon's fight in Act II."

"Poor Peter," Ondine said. "He does so hate letting things go. You've seen the albums? He's got clippings on all his old students. Very few of them become performers, but they do get married and have offspring and so on. One won an award for a children's book: *The Enchanted Fountain,* it was called."

"I know that book!" I exclaimed, surprised. "I bought it for my niece. I didn't know it was based on La Source."

Ondine smiled, a gleam of teeth in the gloomy barn. "That's because she made everything up. She didn't even bother to research the local folklore. She just made up an improving story, peopled it with sentimental children and sweet Victorian fairies, and set my spring behind it like a badly drawn backdrop."

"Isn't that what art is?" I asked, my eyes on the featureless machine. "Making things up?"

"No," she said. "That's what commerce is about—identifying a market and satisfying it. Art is about seeing the truth and revealing it, as beautifully and forcefully and honestly as you are able."

Startled, I turned to look at her. But she was gone.

While the washing machine was disposing of the first load of sheets, I mulled over Ondine's pronouncement, coming to no conclusion except that it felt like part of a conversation we'd been having since I first came to La Source.

When the machine shuddered to a halt at last, I extracted the sheets and carried them to the drying yard in the middle of the bamboo grove, where I pinned them on the lines and left them hanging in the sun. I felt, ridiculously, as though something portentous had happened—in La Source, for Ondine and Collingsworth, for me. But I couldn't for the life of me tell what.

With the washing-machine chapter closed, the camp turned its whole attention to the play. Collingsworth and Ondine coached the students in their lines and their steps, cobbled together props and costumes, set lights and music cues. Collingsworth suggested sets and Ondine made me paint them: pasteboard columns and a rough-cast wall, cloths of honor for the thrones of Theseus and Hyppolita, gnarled trees and rocks of made of old cartons and burlap for the fairy wood.

All this activity kept me from thinking about my own painting, now tucked into the back reaches of the wood shed where the scenery from previous productions was stored. It also kept me from thinking about Collingsworth, who looked older, grayer, and more strained every time I saw him, and Ondine, who seemed to be growing correspondingly younger.

The play was a triumph. We used the open barn as the stage, with the audience in the courtyard and Ondine and Collingsworth on the house veranda, flanking the mayor of St. Martin and his wife, all in high-backed chairs. Town dignitaries ranged down the steps at their feet, and the rest of the audience—townsfolk, Collingsworth's friends, the odd English tourist—half-filled the courtyard. I spent the play backstage, with masks and silk flowers and garlands and a pocket full of pins against wardrobe malfunctions, peering through the decidedly un-Athenian wood I'd made and watching a gaggle of self-centered, rowdy, undisciplined adolescents showing just how focused, passionate, and responsible they could be in service of a commonly desired end.

The applause was uproarious, especially in view of the fact that a good part of the audience hadn't understood a single word of what they'd heard. They applauded the young actors, they applauded the Collingsworths, they even applauded me, dragged from behind the scenery with Cupid's flower in one hand, Titania's pink scrunchy around my wrist, and my unwashed hair bundled into a paint-stained bandanna.

Then they headed for the wine and the food Madame Fabre laid out on long tables, and I headed for the fountain.

I'd planned to go back to my room, take a shower, fall into bed, read a mystery, and go to sleep. But the young actors, turned back into rowdy adolescents, were screeching and whooping in the barn. Needing quiet more than I needed clean hair, I slipped out my private door and felt my way down the dusky path, past the leaning tree, past moss-covered rocks, to Ondine's spring.

The full moon rode high in the sky, silvering the tall ferns growing above and beside the fountain's opening, glinting off the surface of the water like a mirror, picking up the white flowers strewn in the grass like scattered pearls. Everything looked magical and lush, ferns and flowers growing everywhere much more thickly than could possibly have happened in a few short weeks of relative neglect.

It must be my eyes, I thought, or my exhaustion, or a little-known side effect of making an entire grove of Rackhamesque trees for an amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* All it lacked was Titania to be the bank where the wild thyme grows, although it was much too late in the year for cowslips and nodding violets. If they even grew in this part of France.

And then, just as if I'd called her, I saw Titania.

She wasn't what I'd imagined—clothed in green gauze, or pale silk, or even heavy Elizabethan brocade, with a wreath of flowers in her hair. No. This spirit was naked and uncrowned, and stood at the edge of the fountain with her long pale hair veiling her face as she looked down into the water.

I must have made a sound—a gasp, a sigh, a choke of awe or shock or disbelief—for she turned and looked at me from eyes as wide-set and liquid as an animal's.

"Ondine." I said.

She laughed—that light, mocking, enchanting laugh—and tossed back her hair with both hands, showing me her nakedness. It was a wanton gesture, but not a sexual one—she meant to display, not to seduce. In any case it was not a seductive body she showed me, inhumanly thin and smooth and long of flank and waist, with small, high breasts and a smooth blank like a classical statue's at the bottom of her gently sloping belly.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"I didn't. I don't. I'm just dreaming. Or overtired. This isn't real."

"Do you really want to take that attitude, Desdemona? Because if you do, you won't like your present, and then I'll have to be offended and do you a mischief. Which would be a pity, because you've been a great help to me."

I grasped at the one thing out of her speech that made sense. "I don't want to offend you."

"Good. Then you'll take your present?"

I don't really like surprises and I don't like presents I haven't asked for. But Ondine had made it perfectly clear on several occasions what weight she gave my preferences. "Yes," I said. "I'll take it."

"Wait there, then, and I'll get it." She slipped into the water and disappeared under the surface.

Continued on page 89

Listening to the DINOSAURS

James Gurney's alternate universe is an enticing combination of the real and the fantastic. BY KAREN HABER

JAMES GURNEY SAW HIS FIRST DINOSAUR, A TOWERING ALLOSAURUS SKELETON, when he was eight years old, and he's been hooked on paleontology ever since. From that initial encounter, his boyhood daydreams focused on prehistoric behemoths and ancient civilizations, fueled by a steady diet of the *National Geographic* magazines that filled the bookcases outside his bedroom.

Small wonder that he would grow up to become an acclaimed artist who not only worked for *National Geographic* but whose images of dinosaurs have been applauded around the globe. Author and illustrator of the best-selling *Dinotopia* book series, he's seen his work translated into eighteen languages in thirty-two countries. He designed the World

of Dinosaurs commemorative stamps for the United States Postal Service, has worked on assignment for *National Geographic* and other publications, and has won Hugo, Chesley, Spectrum, and World Fantasy Awards for his art. An exhibition of the artwork from *Dinotopia* that began at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., most recently appeared at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Other shows of his work are on the road as well.

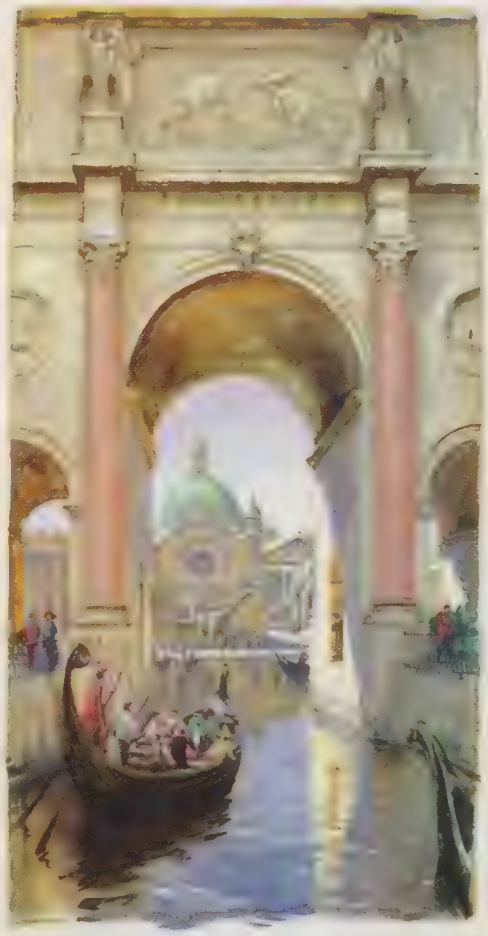
Dinotopia made its debut in 1992, the result of Gurney's "discovery" of an antique traveler's journal describing the amazing faraway land of living dinosaurs and shipwrecked humans. Gurney has written and illustrated four books set in that fabulous land.

Gurney was packing up for his own personal road trip to meet readers and publicize the new *Dinotopia* book, *Journey to Chandara,* but he took some time out for a phone interview about what's new in Dinotopia and other things Dinosaurian.

"I like to think of myself as a transcriber rather than a deity," he says. "I had more fun working on this book than any of the others before. The world of Dinotopia has grown, with new towns and new characters, thanks to the creative contribution of series writers like Alan Dean Foster (*Dinotopia Lost, The Hand of Dinotopia*). Fans on the Dinotopia.com message board also made enormous contributions by helping me compile a complete chronology and geography. I relied on their work when I drew the newest map."

In *Journey to Chandara*, Gurney returns to the faraway island continent where sentient dinosaurs not only survive but cooperate and communicate with the shipwrecked humans who've had the good luck to wash up on the beach. The artist's compelling oil paintings accompany the tale, with many a painterly reference to Golden Age illustration and the artists of the Brandywine School.

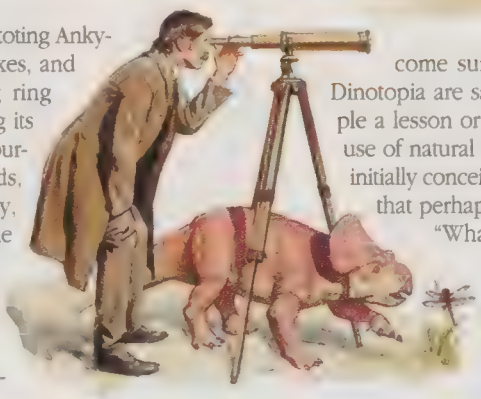
This time out, castaway Dr. Arthur Denison and his dinosaur companion and translator, Bix, embark on a visit to the little-known land of Chandara, a mysterious region in the far southeast of Dinotopia. Along the way they find curious new



characters, encounter a few familiar faces, see vivid new dinosaurs, and learn the exotic ways and philosophies of the people and creatures they meet. Meanwhile, Dr. Denison's son, Will, and his friend, Sylvia, perfect their skills as riders of "skybaxes," flying dinosaurs, and become sky-borne messengers.

Gurney prefers picaresque tale-telling to rough-and-tumble swordplay and other action tropes of fantasy adventure. "A lot of fantasy stories are based on good guys versus bad guys, but I was always much more attracted to stories like Marco Polo and *Gulliver's Travels*. This book deals more with trickster characters, whimsical situations, and different ways of life. It's not about good versus evil in some Manichean philosophy."

In *Dinotopia,* readers will see an abacus-toting Ankylosaurus, step-dancing Protoarchaeopteryxes, and a Kentrosaurus "bakery truck" carrying ring loaves of fresh-baked bread stacked along its spinal spikes. The dinosaurs are beasts of burden, companions, playmates, nursemaids, taxi drivers, translators, and occasionally, musicians. More important, they are also the teachers of their "younger brother" humans, imparting wisdom and peaceful philosophy to their fellow creatures who are less evolved.



Sentient dinosaurs may come as a welcome surprise to new readers. In fact, the dinosaurs of Dinotopia are sage, thoughtful animals capable of teaching people a lesson or two about peaceful coexistence and responsible use of natural resources. The concept of sentient dinosaurs was initially conceived by Gurney's brother, a teacher, who suggested that perhaps humans could learn from dinosaurs.

"What if the dinosaurs domesticated the humans, instead of vice versa?" Gurney asks. "I've always been attracted to the idea of them as ancient and wise companions rather than fearsome beasts. The same is true of the giants of our own world. The more we get to know creatures like

whales and elephants, the more we can discard the older notion of them as brutal monsters."

"Read early accounts of elephants. They were seen as dim-witted brutes. But now we know they're sophisticated creatures who communicate in ways we're only now coming to discover. The natural world is much more beautifully endowed than we could have imagined."

Gurney knows that he'd better stay tuned to the latest developments in dinosaur discoveries. "Kids now are very up to date on dinosaurs and I have to stay on my toes regarding nomenclature when I do a road trip, or they'll correct me."

To stay current, Gurney maintains close contacts with paleontologists and visits the Museum of Natural History in New York to catch up with experts. Thanks to his continued research, his own saurian

sense has changed over the years. "Now when I look back on the paintings of Oviraptors I did in the nineties, they look naked without their feathers! It just goes to show that we can never assume that we know everything about them."

Gurney acknowledges that despite paleontological discoveries, there's an element of fantasy required in depicting dinosaurs. That seems to be where the fun is, for him. "They're on the boundary between fantasy and real. It requires an effort of imagination to bring them fully to life. And I work hard not to anthropomorphize them. I didn't want to get into the silly side, seeing them in unrealistic poses, doing unrealistic things."

In case you're wondering, only parrot-beaked dinosaurs such as Bix, a Protoceratops can speak. Gurney takes care to never to show the talking dinosaurs being directly quoted, preserving an element of mystery, although he does allow Bix to be seen joining in the chorus of a sea chanty.

"In the new book, I wanted to do the lettering by hand, because you can always tell when it's done by a machine," says the artist.

Continued on page 90

The Doom of Love in Small Spaces

When you're almost completely out of love and hope, sometimes you just want to hunker down under your desk and let the world go to hell.

>>> BY KEN SCHOLES ❧ ILLUSTRATION BY CAT SCOTT

We met at work. ❧ She looked at me when she walked into the room and I was immediately untethered. Pretty brunette in a red dress who knew she was pretty, knew that the thigh-high slit along the side of her skirt and the haphazard plummet of her neckline were reefs where men could be shipwrecked. Her flashing eyes sang danger and peace in two-part harmony. Each step toward me delivered the unrelenting clip-clap, clip-clap of heels across a tile floor so brightly polished that it reflected back her matching red panties. ❧ I held my breath and waited to catch fire from the sight of her. ❧ "Central Supply," she said when she stood in front of my desk. Her voice melted the crystalline sugar on my glazed donut. I watched it puddle and pool on the paper napkin.

LOVE

I swallowed. "That's me, Miss."

She smiled. "Just you?"

I nodded. Now my styrofoam cup started bending from the heat of her, tilting precariously. The coffee inside it bubbled. "Just me."

She leaned over my desk and bent slightly, tipping her breasts toward me. They hung, held in place by a red bra. "I need more love," she said. "We've run completely out on the fifth floor."

The hair on my arms curled in on itself, the stink of burning in my nose alongside her floral perfume and her peppermint breath. I forced my eyes to her face, squinting to see her through the haze of smoke.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

My tongue expanded in my mouth, swelling to block my words. I forced it back to normal size. "You must be new?"

She threw back her shoulders and tossed her hair. "Not so much." Her teeth shined now, fine and white and straight. "We just don't use a lot of supplies anymore on the fifth floor. I think the last person they sent down was Bill when they ran out of hope."

I remembered Bill. He'd dragged himself in here and died in the corner before he could tell me what he wanted. It wasn't the first time. Wouldn't be the last. "I remember Bill," I said. "Good chap."

"Dead chap," she said.

I shrugged and motioned to the chair beside my desk. "It happens a lot around here."

She sat and crossed her legs. The slit fell open like a theater curtain. Long, slender legs, white heat shimmering off them to singe my eyebrows.

"So you need some love," I said, opening my card file and thumbing through the microfiche.

She folded her hands in her lap. "Please."

"How much?"

"Well, as much as you can spare."

I slipped the flimsy plastic film into the reader and hit the switch. A blue field swimming with white letters blurred into focus with the turn of a knob.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She pulled self-consciously at her bra strap and fidgeted. "Elevators still out?" I asked, trying to make small talk.

She nodded. "Board says they're not repairing them, either."

"Bloody barkers," I said. Of course, she had no way of knowing that I was the one who told them not to repair the elevators. Working elevators meant the rapid movement of supplies up and down the building. I'd sent the memo in, followed all the usual forms. Naturally, they'd listened to me.

They had to.

I moved the arm of the microfiche reader, sliding the film over the light. "Love," I said. "Any particular size or shape?"

"Love comes in shapes and sizes?" she asked.

"All," I said.

She answered me with a laugh.

"We're out," I lied. I had a smallish off-brand muzzled and leashed in the back of the storeroom that I'd left off the inventory. "But we could order some."

She stood, came around my desk so she could read over my shoulder. She leaned in to me and I felt her breath on my neck. "How long?"

I shrugged. "They'll send it through the canal. Drive it in by truck from there. Then there's the pass. Eight weeks maybe?"

"That long for something as simple as love?"

I swallowed and nodded, felt her press against my shoulder as I turned in my chair. "How much should I order?" I picked up a pencil and a requisition tablet.

Her eyes narrowed in thought. "I don't know."

"Well, is it a small space or a large space?"

She looked confused. "Pardon?"

"The space," I said, "where you need the love?"

"Oh. I don't know. Is it important?"

I nodded. "It is. Too much love in a small space, it'd drive you mad."

"Why is that?" she asked.

"I think it's because love rapidly expands, depleting the oxygen and eradicating all life but its own."

"But oh," she said, "what sweet madness it would be." She pursed her lips. "Eight weeks? It took me three to get here."

"Damned elevators," I said. "But you don't need to go back. You can stay here with me. I have an extra cot in the back office."

Clip-clap, clip-clap across the tile. Heat receded as she paced away. She laughed. "You're a troll," she said. "Why ever would I stay here with you?"

She had a point. I was a troll. Of sorts. Supplies or bridges, it matters little. Trolls guard. I thought about my donut. I thought about the love leashed somewhere behind me. I thought about the girl in red everything pacing the sub-sub-basement clerk's station at the foot of the storeroom doors, three weeks down the stairs and ladders of the Bureaucracy.

I grimaced. "I don't know why you'd stay here with me."

I snuck a glance at her. Creamy white thigh peeking out, smooth curves, legs scissoring. I stood up and lumbered toward the phone on the wall. I lifted the receiver and held it to my ear, ringing the crank. "Gallingwise Seven Six Three, please," I told the operator when I heard her cut in.

When Central Stores picked up, I read off the requisition numbers, ordering an abstract by numeric coding. They gave me release order numbers that I scribbled in blue pencil onto the requisition forms.

I tore off the sheets and gave her the carbon copies. "Eight weeks, they said, give or take. You're still welcome to stay. I've got running water, too." I sat back down at my desk, chair groaning beneath my weight.

Her eyebrows lifted. "Running water? Hot or cold?"

I smiled. "Both."

She tossed her hair again and struck a pose. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to get this look out of a bucket of secondhand washwater?" Or rusty water from a broken pipe, I thought. I'd watched her through my periscope that morning before she tackled the last half mile or so of her journey down, before I knew I was her destination.

I could have her, I thought. I could have her here for eight weeks with me only it wouldn't be because of me. It would be because of the makeshift tub, the series of pipes and tubes and hoses tapping into the central boiler. Little comforts I'd rigged to make my job more tolerable. But the because didn't matter.

"It's that bad up there, is it?" Of course, I knew that it was.

She rolled her eyes. "Fifth floor is a wreck. Frankly, none of the others between here and there are all that wonderful, either."

"But I'll bet the seventh floor is just fine." Of course, I also knew this. That was the Board's floor and I kept it that way just as I kept the other floors the way they were. Memos flying from my pen. Keep the Machine under a constant state of stress and alarm, taut with opportunities for improvement ... just like the world beyond

>> "Muscles tire.... Words fail

our little game of government.

"Have you ever been to the seventh floor?" she asked.

"Wouldn't want to," I said. "Incompetent gits, the lot of them."

A moment of fear washed her face and she blushed at it. She looked around slowly. "I can't believe you said that."

"Why? It's not as if they can hear." And, I told myself, it's not as if it weren't true. They were incompetent. That's why they needed me.

She paced some more. "Running water and a cot?"

"And donuts," I said, "Delivered every Tuesday." I paused. "I might even have some extra liquid hand soap lying about. Makes a passable bubble bath."

Her smile shone out not just from her face but from every part of her, beaming out from the tips of her fingers and the ends of her hair and the curves of her hips and breasts, the line of her legs and neck, the exhilaration of her eyes.

"I'll stay," she said.

"I'll call up to five and let them know."

"No need," she said. "The phones are out past the third floor."

"That's unfortunate," I said. But of course, I'm the one who kept them out. "I'll send up a memo then." I grabbed a memo form and rummaged through the box near my desk for an undented pneumatic carrier. "It'll take longer, though."

She curtsied. "Thank you, kind sir." She paused, her brow furrowed. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm Harmony Sheffleton," she said, extending her hand.

I shook it. Her hand disappeared in my own massive fist. "Drum Farrelley."

"Drum as in Drummond?" she asked.

I nodded. "Glad to know you." And I tried not to smile, tried not to show her that I was as excited about her staying as she was, though for different reasons. But I failed. I felt my fat lips twitch into a grin. "Let's get you that bath," I told her.

And that was how we met.

She raised one of the apples to her mouth. I watched her lips part, watched her shiny white teeth slide into the pock-marked red skin. It's my heart, I thought. She's biting into my heart and in seven weeks there won't even be a core to show it was ever there. The tube whistled and groaned, a battered carrier dropped into the cradle.

Harmony stepped toward it, setting the apples on my desk. "May I?"

I nodded.

She opened the carrier, pulled out the memo, unfolded it, read it. I watched her eyes move back and forth, her lips now tightly pressed together. She looked up. "They'll expect me back with the love once it arrives. Until then, I should make myself useful to you down here."

She crumpled the memo and moved toward the furnace.

"We usually file all correspondence," I said as she tossed it in.

"Sorry. I didn't think it was important."

"It probably isn't," I said.

She grinned. "So after my bath, I'll make myself useful to you." She picked up the apples, stepped closer to me. My size dwarfed her.

"Any good?" I asked.

She smiled and stepped even closer, now eclipsed by the shadow of me. I could smell Grundy's Liquid Anti-Bacterial Hand Soap rising from her skin in waves but it could've been summer sun on a field of roses. I could see the swell of her breasts as they struggled to fit a bra two sizes too small, the white skin disappearing into a trace of red lace. She lifted the apple, the meat glistening where her teeth had torn into its skin. The apple rose slowly and I watched her wrist, her fingers, her arm as they traveled upward toward me with it. She held it under my nose, near my snaggle-toothed mouth.

"Taste and see," she said.

.... Faith fades.... Fear falls."

Time moved at a measured pace as it does in all Bureaucracies. And here, in the tangled, loose ends of the Great Red-Tape Wrap-Up, there was really not much work to do anymore. Inventory and a bit of paperwork, filing and a bit of maintenance. Few came for supplies these days and I liked it that way. It gave me time to admire my guest.

Her first bath set the tempo for our time together. It quickly became a daily ritual for her to lay in the tub up to her neck in warm bubbles while I sat on the other side of the cracked door. We kept the door between us and we talked. Mostly about work but sometimes about life because the two were so intricately intertwined.

"My job is dull beyond measure, utterly uninteresting," she said during her third bath. "But yours is quite fascinating. Tell me more, Drum?"

And I did.

Our first week slipped past. On Tuesday, the Rationer came with his donuts, unlabeled tin cans and packets of instant coffee. He even had a few mealy apples that I swapped a case of obsolete toner cartridges for. Harmony clapped her hands with delight when I showed her, then suddenly became serious as she lowered her voice.

"Won't you get in trouble for that?" she asked.

"For what?"

"Those toner cartridges—" she started.

"Were completely worthless and taking up valuable and much-needed storage space," I finished for her. "Just part of the job."

After her bath, she hung her clean clothes on the makeshift line by the boiler. I had rummaged an oversized jumpsuit from the janitorial supplies. She held the collar closed with one hand while she slung her clean dress, bra, and panties over the makeshift line with the other. My own clothes from yesterday still hung there and I blushed when I saw her dainty scraps of underwear next to my tent-sized, tattered, and stained boxers.

Four weeks had passed now. She'd taken twenty-nine baths. I'd sat outside the door each time, listening to the music of her movement in the water, listening to the wet slap of cloth on concrete on the days that she scrubbed her clothes.

"So what are we doing today?" she asked.

"Inventory, I think."

Her eyes lit up. "Can we do the abstracts this time?"

I thought about the love I'd hidden there and the small box of second-hand hope concealed behind row upon row of ennui, terror, despair, and longing. I shook my head. "No, it's paper today."

She pouted. "But I want to do the abstracts."

I remembered the time I dropped a bottle of despair, splattering my boots with thick, black strands. I'd had to burn them eventually. "Trust me," I said. "You really don't."

"I want to do the abstracts." She stomped her foot. Then, her mock anger collapsed on itself and she burst into a fit of giggles.

I chuckled at her. She offered a sheepish grin.

"Paper it is," she said.

The front office bell chimed and we went out, hoping it was the Rationer. He'd not shown up Tuesday for the first time in seventeen years.

Now he stood in the office, bruised and bandaged, on a Thursday.

"Black Drawlers on the stairs," he said, patting his sword. We made our trades. He threw in an extra can of potted meat as an apology

and I threw in an extra box of Number 1 Pencils as a thank you. Keeping the Machine broken was one thing; Drawlers in the stairwells was another.

Harmony's eyes had gone wide. "Black Drawlers? Here?"

"Sometimes," the Rationer said as he hefted his pack into a battered wheelbarrow. "It's the season for them."

I looked at the calendar and flipped the page. He was right. After he left, his wagon wheels squealing on the tile, I looked up at her. "It is the season," I told her, dropping my fat finger onto the day after tomorrow.

Her eyes danced. Music thrummed from her muscles as they followed her eyes, dragging her body into a little jig.

"Do you celebrate down here?"

"Not usually. You?"

She shook her head. "We used to. I miss it."

So the next day, we made our little red hats from cotton swabs and construction paper and paste. She opened eight unlabeled cans, mixed the fruits with fruits and the vegetables with the potted meat and two fistfuls of rice. I took a screwdriver to the furnace grate and pushed the office's single faux-leather couch in front of it. We wore our hats and ate our rice stew while watching the fire sort itself out.

"Do you have a copy of the Cycle?" she asked between spoonfuls. "My Mom used to read it to me every Dragon's Mass Eve."

"I know it by heart," I said.

Her eyes widened. "Drum, you surprise me. What's a troll like you doing with scripture rattling about in his head?"

I set my empty bowl on the small table between my massive feet. "I wanted to be a priest when I was younger. Spent a year in the seminary, then gave it up for all of this." I swept my arm wide to encompass our surroundings. I barked out a laugh. "My own kingdom."

She looked around. "It's a bit small." Her forehead wrinkled. "Why didn't you stay on with the seminary?"

"The world wasn't in a good place for it. Civil service seemed a better bet. Of course, this was thirty years ago. When I was closer to your age."

"I'm older than I look," she said. She wriggled herself closer to me.

"Do you believe in the Santaman?" Harmony asked between bitefuls.

I shook my head. "Not really. I did once."

"I don't think I do, either. If he were real, he'd have come back by now."

"Maybe," I said, "he's waiting for us to figure things out for ourselves."

"Or maybe our hearts are too small for that kind of love," she said. "Like you were saying when we first met: The doom of love in small spaces. Maybe if he were to come back now, we'd go insane from it. Maybe this broken world is opening us up somehow, making us really, really ready for him."

"I like that," I said. It reminded me of my job. Keep the Machine in disrepair and disconnect, keep the thousands of us in the Bureaucracy inches from disaster to bring out our best and finest effort. I smiled down at her. "It has a certain poetry to it."

She bit her lip. A devilish light sparked in her eyes. "Are you ready for your gift?"

"A gift? You got me a gift?"

She nodded. "It's Dragon's Mass Eve, Drum. Of course I did. You can't celebrate Dragon's Mass without gifts."

I sighed. "I didn't get you anything. I just ... didn't think about it." But of course I had. I'd thought about it ever since the Rationer reminded me of the day. For something like thirty years, the only things I'd ever let loose from my supply room had been the scant little I had to in order to keep my job. Except for the seventh floor, but I told myself that was just to keep the Board greased up and pliant. Still, I'd walked the aisles of my lair looking for something, anything, to give the girl in red. I'd even taken down the small box of hope, shaken a bit into my big hand, before tipping it carefully back inside.

Harmony stretched herself up on the couch. "Well, I have an idea about that," she said.

"What's that?"

She drew her face closer to mine. I could smell pear syrup on her breath; it intoxicated me. "I'll give you my gift. And if you like it, you can give it back to me."

I frowned. "Shouldn't it be the other way around? If I don't like it, I give it back to you?"

>> "Our world is out of love, it's

I looked down at her, inhaled the scent of her hair and skin. She put her bowl down, lay back, and closed her eyes. She still radiated more heat than the fire but a month of life with her and I didn't have to worry about catching fire anymore. The deepest places in me had burned to the ground on that first day. "Will you recite it for me?" she asked.

"I haven't said it for a long time," I said.

"You'll do fine." She opened her eyes, trapped me in them briefly, then closed them again. "Please?"

I cleared my voice. "Muscles tire," I said, my voice rumbling low into the room. "Words fail." I paused to let the language set its own pace. "Faith fades." I watched her, watched her own lips moving to the words as mine did. "Fear falls." Her eyelids twitched a little. She was watching me watch her and a smile pulled at her mouth. I paused again, then closed my own eyes and gave myself to language and mythology. "In the Sixteenth Year of the Sixteen Princes the world came to an end when the dragon's back gave out...."

I recited it all the way through. Afterward, we didn't speak. Together, we lit a candle for the broken dragon upon whose back the world languishes. Then, we turned toward the north, knelt on the floor with my hands swallowing hers, and whispered a prayer for the Santaman's second coming.

Later, we ate our fruit salad and talked.

She shook her head. Her hair flowed like liquid midnight when she did. "It's what I said."

"Okay. If I like it, I can give it back."

She pulled away, her face concerned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She leaned back in.

Then she kissed me.

And because I liked it, I kissed her back.

At seven weeks, the phone rang when she was in the bath.

"I'll get it," I said.

After the call, I went back to my place by the door.

"Who was it?" she asked over the noise of the water.

I rubbed my face. I planned a lie, planned it well, then failed miserably to deliver it. "It was Central Stores," I said. "There's a bit of a problem."

"What's that? Truck break down?"

Worse, I wanted to say. Our world is out of love, it's on back order. They sent the ship but the ship sank on a reef and the world's last love drowned in the hold. But suddenly I couldn't speak. Suddenly pin-pricks pushed at my eyes and darkness dragged at my heart. I thought about my secret stash and knew that soon I'd have

to tell the truth. But for now, after a lifetime of success disappointing others, I didn't have it in me to disappoint her. "Nothing important," I said. "They're just running a bit behind. I'll send up another memo and let them know."

The door opened. She stood there in nothing but a towel that hid little. "How far behind?"

"A few more weeks."

"I'd like that," she said. "Besides, I still haven't helped you with the abstracts." She turned, poised on the tips of her toes, her dark hair plastered over her upper back and shoulders.

"Trust me," I told her. "They're pretty much the same as everything else." I snorted. "You've picked the rest of it up quite quickly. You could probably do this job when I retire."

She flinched; I should've wondered why.

"You're retiring?" She used the heel of her foot to push the door partly closed. From the corner of my eye, I saw a brief flash as the towel dropped to the floor.

"Someday," I said. "Don't know what they'll do without me." But I did know. At least, I thought I did before Harmony walked into my office looking for love. Before meeting her, I'd known the place would fall entirely once I stepped down. I'd kept the Board distanced from the rest of the Bureaucracy. I'd sent them the cream and others the curds. I'd kept the Machine barely functioning but once I moved aside, our small space in the world would collapse in on itself. The other six floors would storm the seventh in a rage. But now I wondered. Maybe someone else could take my place, could prolong the inevitable until the world's groan wound its way north. And maybe—though I doubted it—maybe in the north, salvation would stir and a red-clad myth would strap on his sword, saddle up his wolf-stallion, and ride south to find us and show us a new home.

My sudden collision with truth and passion unsettled me.

"What are you going to do?" She asked. Now I could hear her scrubbing her clothes. "When you retire, I mean?"

"I used have it all planned out," I said. "I was going to cash in my pension and buy a horse. Ride west."

"Why not now?" she asked.

"Epiphany," I said.

on back order."

"No, Harmony," she answered. "I'm Harmony."

"No," I said. "I had an epiphany."

She laughed. "That's my sister's name. So when did you have this epiphany?"

A minute ago, I didn't say. "Doesn't matter."

The door opened. She stood in front of me, freshly scrubbed, wearing the oversized jumpsuit. She hadn't kissed me since Dragon's Mass Eve. And I hadn't tried to kiss her. But once in a while, in the midst of our days, there would be a pause, a moment where we simply stood still and looked at one another.

We had our moment and then we went to work.

On the morning of the seventh day of our eighth week, she skipped her bath and wore her red dress instead of the coveralls.

"It's time for the truth, Drum," she told me, "no matter how hard it is."

She'd caught me. I didn't know how. Maybe she'd read it on my face all this time. I'd lived by lying my entire life but somehow she saw past it and knew me. I put my head in my hands.

"I'm sorry, Harmony," I said.

She looked surprised. "What are you sorry about?"

"That call from Central Stores last week. The shipment isn't running a few weeks late."

"Drum, that's not important."

"No," I said. "You're right. It's time for the truth. There's no love coming. There's none to send. The ship went down, all hands lost." I paused. More truth pushed at me. "But that's not all," I said.

Her eyes blazed at me. "I didn't come here for the love, Drummond."

And suddenly, I realized what she meant about it being time for the truth. Time for her truth, not mine. Time to uncover her lie and lay it out for me to see.

"I'm not even from the fifth floor." She waited. The fierceness in her eyes abated, became a smolder then ashes mixed with rain. "I'm from the seventh."

I growled. It started in my belly and worked its way into my throat and past bared teeth. "You lied to me. You're from the Board, aren't you?"

She nodded, her eyes wandered to the clock. "The memo should be here any minute." The rain drowned the ashes. Her lip quivered and she started to cry. Her shoulders shook.

I wanted to grab her and shake her, toss her about like the toy she made me feel like. "All that interest in my work? All that making yourself useful?"

She nodded. "I'm your replacement." She looked up, her face glistening from tears and snot. "When they ran the ad, I applied for it. I wanted to make things better. They wanted to make things better, too."

The pneumatic tube clanked and groaned. A heavy carrier dropped into the cradle.

I turned away from it. I opened the carrier and a battered gold watch fell out, far too small for my thick wrist. A card fell out, too.

I ripped it open and read the message. Gratitude of the Board and all that rubbish. Warmest wishes for a happy retirement. Utmost confidence in Miss Sheffleton's capabilities.

I looked over at her. Her dress rippled with her sobs.

She saw me looking. "I don't want it anymore, Drum."

I didn't say anything. I turned around and left.

She found me sitting in the back of the storeroom. I sat on the floor, stroking love's soft underbelly. It rolled its eyes at me and tried to lick its lips behind the muzzle.

I'd decided it wasn't so bad after all. I'd given my thirty years. I'd even decided that her betrayal was a blessing in disguise, jarring me out of a rut I'd lain in for too long.

I felt her hand on my shoulder. "Will you ride west?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Stay with me," she said. "Don't retire. We can work it together." She waited. When I didn't answer, she added: "I want you to stay."

I scratched behind love's ears. "Would we keep things the same or let them fall apart?"

"Neither," she said. "We'd make them better. It's time to try a new way."

She knelt down, her own hands petting the love. It twisted to get more of her. "What's this?" she asked.

More truth, I thought. "It's love," I said. "I lied before about being out. I just wanted you to stay here with me." I looked at her. "I was tired of being alone."

"Imagine it," she said. "You and me. We fix the elevator and the phones, first. Get the supply chain running so that Facilities can take over the repairs. Before you know it, we'd have a different world."

"And," I said, "we'd have some love and a little hope."

She grinned. "You've got hope here, too?"

I smiled. "Only a little."

She kissed me for the second time. I kissed her back.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Okay," I answered.

I felt along love's muzzle and found its buckles with my fingers.

Harmony reached over and slipped love from its leash. ❧

On the Banks of the River of Heaven

BY RICHARD PARKS ■ ILLUSTRATION BY TIFFANY PROTHERO

Crossing the River of Heaven on a bridge of birds takes luck, courage, and friends in high places. If you don't have the last one, the first two don't count.

The fish in the River of Heaven—known to mortals as the Milky Way—are both immortal and elusive. For many years they fell through Kaiboshi the Herdsman's nets until the year his wife, Asago-hime the Divine Weaver, made him a gift of a special net, finer than gossamer and stronger than iron. With this he caught the Celestial Fish easily enough while the Celestial Ox that was his primary responsibility grazed peacefully nearby and the Celestial Otter watched from the river.

Kaiboshi did not eat the fish, of course. Fishing was just a way to pass the time until the seventh day of the seventh month should come again.

Kaiboshi had just hauled in one more wriggling net of fish when the Celestial Otter, who until this point had done nothing but watch, stuck his head out of the water. "Herdsman, give me a fish, please," he said.

Kaiboshi frowned. "It is your role to chase the fish, not to catch them."

"And so I have done, for eternities past counting," Otter said. "Is it strange that, after all this time, I might want to know how it feels to actually hold one?"

Kaiboshi, who knew quite a bit himself about wanting what he could not have, carefully removed one of the Celestial Fish, its scales iridescent with stars, from the net and handed it to Otter, who carefully took the fish in his paws and examined it with what Kaiboshi could only interpret as awe and wonder. After a bit Otter put the fish in its jaws, though only tightly enough to hold it. With this he happily paraded for a time along the banks of the river, head held high.

During all this handling the fish just gasped, as any other fish would do, though in the case of a Celestial Fish this was no more than a polite reprimand, as one might clear one's throat to remind another that someone is waiting on them.

"Hmmm? Oh, of course. Please excuse me." Otter placed the fish back in the water and released it just as Kaiboshi emptied his net. There was a swirl among the reeds near the shore, then calm again. Kaiboshi gathered up his net and took it to a nearby tree branch to dry. When he returned to the shore both the Ox and the Otter were waiting for him. Or rather Otter was waiting; the ox simply had not moved.

"I wish to thank you," Otter said.

"No need," Kaiboshi said. "It was little enough that I did."

"Perhaps to you," said Otter. "But it meant a great deal to me, and so I must repay you. Is there anything you desire that is in my power to grant?"

Kaiboshi thought about what he wanted. "Tomorrow is the seventh day of the seventh month. The Master of Heaven has decreed that on this one day of the year I may cross the Bridge of Birds to visit my lady Asago-hime, and thus I am soon to be reunited with my love. The rains have prevented us seeing each other for two years now, but surely we will not be denied a third time. I wish only to see my love; there is nothing anyone can grant that I desire more than this."

Otter sighed. "I understand. Yet I consider myself in your debt from this day forward, so if you ever do think of a way I might be of use to you, seek me here at the river."

With that the Otter slipped back into the water and disappeared with barely a ripple, off again to pursue the elusive fish. Kaiboshi the Divine Herdsman watched the Ox graze until night fell, and then he slept and dreamed of his love.

On the seventh day of the seventh month as it had for the previous two years, it rained. And it rained. The cranes still came at Kaiboshi's bidding to stand by the shore and form the base of the bridge. Next came the geese and the ducks and other waterfowl, who fared well enough creating the platform and the first few degrees of arc for the bridge. After that, however, came the hawks and crows and sparrows and smaller birds, and the rain beat down on them incessantly, and their wings became sodden and would no longer support them and a bridge, too. The cranes held on gamely as the river swelled into flood, but their skinny legs began to tremble. Kaiboshi reluctantly concluded that the enterprise was doomed, and he dismissed the birds with thanks rather than risk seeing them fall in the river after the inevitable collapse.

Three years now the rains had come on the appointed day. For three years the Bridge of Birds that was his only way to cross the Celestial River had been unable to form. Kaiboshi began to wonder if he was cursed, but more he wondered if Asago-hime had started to forget him. He sat down on the banks of the river and let the rising waters chill his feet as he indulged in a bout of melancholy, since he knew of nothing else he could do.

"Three years is a long time to be apart from the one you love," he said aloud. "Even for an immortal." He turned once more to the Celestial Ox, patiently grazing in the rain. "You could decide to graze on the other side of the river, you know. The Master of Heaven would have to allow me to follow you there."

The Ox merely turned its broad posterior in Kaiboshi's general direction and munched on a patch of sweet grass. Not that Kaiboshi could find it in his heart to fault the creature for this; the other side of the river was largely built over by the Master of Heaven's grand palace and those of many of the other major gods, and those who had gardens kept them behind high walls. The grazing there was, from an ox's view, very poor. Thus they were segregated according to function: Asago-hime to the palace, where she wove night and day to make the clothing and tapestries of the gods. Kaiboshi to the lands opposite across the river, where the wild creatures ran free and the grazing was best. Kaiboshi understood and accepted this, except for his separation from Asago-hime. That separation he had never been able to accept, save for the fact of their yearly visits. Only lately even that comfort was denied him.

Kaiboshi pulled a flute from his pack, the flute he had carefully carved and polished as a present to Asago-hime two years before and had yet to give to her. "She'll forget me," he said. "I know it. The curse will continue, the rain will come, and she will forget me."

"Unlikely," said a voice that was not Kaiboshi.

Otter stuck his head out of the swollen river near Kaiboshi's feet. "Pardon the intrusion, but Asago-hime is quite unhappy, on account of the rain. She said so."

Kaiboshi frowned. "How do you know this ... oh. Of course. You can swim the Celestial River."

"Since the river is my home, it would be strange if I could not," Otter said. "And I have just come from a sheltered cove beneath the window to the room where your lady resides. If the thought gives you comfort, know that she is just as miserable as you are, if not more so."

"I do not wish for my lady to be unhappy, and yet I do want her to miss me when I am not there. Oh, if only we could be together always, things would be so much simpler."

"I doubt that," Otter said. "It is my understanding that, when you lived with Asago-hime, both of you shamefully neglected your duties. The Celestial Ox wandered where it would, including the gardens of any god foolish enough to live on this side of the river. And your lady wife avoided her weaving to the point that the gods were becoming rather threadbare. Is this not why you were separated in the first place?"

"We had each other," Kaiboshi said, smiling faintly. "We had little need of anything or anyone else."

"And that's the problem in a nutshell," Otter said, "when so many other people need and depend on you."

Kaiboshi rested his head on his knees, looking glum. "You sound like the Lord of Heaven."

Otter shrugged. "One can understand his point of view without necessarily agreeing with everything he's done. What's that you're holding?"

"It was a present for Asago-hime, and I can't give it to her. Unless ... Otter, can you take this flute across the river to Asago-hime? Would you?"

"Of course I can and would. I am in your debt, as I said. Yet the water would likely ruin it. Perhaps, if you were to find something dry to wrap it in?"

Kaiboshi found and cut a length of sturdy bamboo, just longer and wider than the flute. From this he made a watertight case and placed the flute inside, then tied a loop of cord around it. This Otter allowed Kaiboshi to place around his neck and then Otter set out across the river. Kaiboshi watched him dwindle to a speck on the

vast water and disappear. Kaiboshi sat back down on the banks of the river and watched the spot where Otter had vanished while the Celestial Ox, perhaps remembering a more succulent patch of grass elsewhere, wandered off.

When Otter reached the other side of the river, he went straight to the little sheltered cove he had spoken of, where, indeed, the window to Asago-hime's rooms opened over the water. Otter could hear the clack-clack of Asago-hime's loom as she wove. The noise was rather loud, so Otter was forced to shout to be heard.

"Asago-hime? May I speak with you?"

The Divine Weaver appeared at the window. Otter did not consider himself any judge of what the human immortals called beautiful, but he was forced to admit that there was a pleasing aesthetic quality to Asago-hime's face, and her long black hair set it off marvelously. "Who calls? Is that you, Otter?" she asked. Her voice sounded somewhat husky, and, looking closer, Otter could tell that her eyes were reddened.

"Yes, Lady. Have you been weeping?"

"The rains kept my husband from me yet again. It is almost more than I can bear," she said. "Yet the cloth must be woven, and I must get back to it."

She started to turn away, but Otter called out to her again. "Tarry a moment, Lady. I bring a gift from your husband, and I cannot enter the palace. Can you come down to the shore?"

Asago-hime's countenance brightened immediately. "Oh, certainly!"

Her weaving apparently forgotten, Asago-hime disappeared from the window, and it was hardly a moment before a door near the base of the palace wall opened and she hurried out in layered blue kimono that rippled like water and glowed like the sky. For a moment all Otter could do was stare at her, impolite as that was.

"A token from my husband?" Asago-hime prodded gently.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. It's here ..." Otter took the loop from around his neck and pushed the bamboo case to the shore where Asago-hime could reach it. She pulled it open and took out the flute.

[illegible]

"Oh, how lovely!" She immediately set the flute to her lips and proceeded to weave music as easily and surely as she did cloth. Otter could do little but stare and listen until the song was finished. "I've wanted to play more but lacked the means. It is good to know that my husband has not forgotten me."

"Forgotten? In truth he thinks of little else," Otter said dryly. He hesitated then. "This is not my place to say, but Kaiboshi was kind to me, and I would not see more misfortune come to him. His worry at being separated from you may cause him to neglect his duties."

She smiled a little sadly then. "Otter, I know full well what My Lord is feeling. It's one thing to be attentive to one's assigned purpose when there is always something to look forward to, but what does either of us have now? The rains haven fallen on our assigned day for three years now. They may fall for another three ... or three hundred."

"That is unfortunate ... and somewhat strange," Otter said.

"Strange or not, it is the way things are. I would not wish Kaiboshi to neglect his duties, but I also cannot wish that he forget me. You are a kind creature, Otter, but you play in the river and chase the Celestial Fish, and nothing else is required of you. How can you understand how I feel?"

Otter thought of the one time in eternity he had held one of the Celestial Fish. "Perhaps at least a little," Otter said. "As you say, my duty is to chase fish in the river, not to command the rain that flows into it or even the water that flows in it. Still, if I can be of help to either of you, I will."

Asago-hime bowed in polite thanks to Otter and returned to the palace to resume her weaving. Yet every now and then, if one listened carefully, one would hear the clack of the loom grow still and be replaced by the long, mournful notes of the flute.

As the Divine Year progressed there were rumblings on the Plain of Heaven that had nothing to do with rain. Twice now the Celestial Ox had to be shooed out of one or another god's garden, and the last several batches of cloth from Asago-hime's loom were all of pearlescent white, beautiful beyond reckoning but suitable only for weddings or funerals. Since there were precious few of either in the Heavens, the cloth began to pile up to no good purpose.

So things stood as the seventh day of the seventh month approached yet again, and as the time grew even closer, one day Otter surfaced to find the Lord of Heaven standing on the banks of the Celestial River, staring across the water. The view was lovely, but he was not smiling.

Otter knew that this was not the best time to approach, but it was clear enough what was on the Lord of Heaven's mind, and Otter's obligation to Kaiboshi would not let him remain silent.

"Is it my lord's will that Kaiboshi and Asago-hime be punished yet again? Will you separate them forever this time?"

The god scowled. "What would you have me do, friend Otter? They neglect their duties yet again, despite their agreement with me, and I must bear both blame and responsibility for this. I may be Lord of Heaven, but I am not the master of my own daughter's heart."

"Isn't it right that this be so?" Otter asked, curious.

"Above all else, the Celestial Plain is about order, friend Otter. Love is not orderly. It comes as it will, and it leaves chaos in its wake. It is dangerous."

"Does that include your love for your daughter? You do love her, I know."

The Lord of Heaven sighed. "A father's love for his daughter is part of the Celestial Order, but so is her obedience to him. Instead Asago-hime chose Kaiboshi over the man I had chosen for her. To my regret I indulged her in this, and now all the Heavens pay the price of her obstinance to this very day, not just Asago-hime and Kaiboshi."

"That is only because the rains have kept them apart for the last three years," Otter said.

"And why do you think that is? Or do you believe it a coincidence?"

"It did seem strangely persistent," Otter said. "Yet, considering the effects, I had not thought it in your interest to cause it."

"Rain is the dominion of the Rain God. And again you see the fruit of my daughter's whims."

"I don't understand," Otter said.

"Asago-hime chose the Celestial Herdsman as her husband. To spare the Rain God's pride I did not let it be commonly known that he was the man I originally intended for her."

Understanding dawned. "Ah, but I rather fancy that he knew. If it is his jealousy that causes him to interfere, why don't you simply command him to stop?"

"From making rain? That is what the Rain God does. While it is true that his timing shows a vindictive streak I didn't know he had, that alone does not violate the tenets of his area of responsibility. I can no more command him to stop the rain than I could punish spring grass for being green. On the other hand, that my daughter's bargain has turned out poorer than she or my son-in-law hoped is no excuse for not honoring that bargain."

Otter bowed low. "Certainly not. Yet you would agree that, if the rains were to hold off for a year or two, the situation might improve without drastic action on anyone's part?"

"No doubt, but I think it will rain this year too."

"What if it doesn't? You have no great wish to inflict any further suffering on your daughter. Indeed, such might even be counterproductive." Otter saw the scowl deepening on the Lord of Heaven visage and hastened to add, "Not that I would dare to hint that the Lord of Heaven's judgment is either unfair or unwarranted. Still, if there was an alternative...?"

"I have said I will not interfere. What can you do?"

"Perhaps nothing," Otter conceded, "but why not give me until the seventh day of the seventh month to find out? Since this situation has been going on for the better part of the last four years, a day or two more would surely do no harm."

The Lord of Heaven appeared to consider this. "As you wish," he said finally. "Until noon on the seventh day of the seventh month, but not a moment longer." He turned away from the river then and strode back to his palace, leaving Otter behind in the river to ponder how in all the world he could stop the rain when he couldn't even catch a fish.

"It is the Rain God's jealousy that makes him keep Asago-hime and Kaiboshi apart. I know of no cure for this, but it's possible that, if I were to talk to him, he could be persuaded to see reason," Otter said.

This seemed like a perfectly sensible plan to Otter who, despite or because of his playful nature, was himself an eminently sensible creature. He set out at once for the Rain God's home, which was at the top of a high mountain near the headwaters of the Celestial River. It was there that Otter immediately ran into two problems. The first was that the streams rushing down from the mountaintop into the river below were cascading downward even faster than the Celestial Otter could swim, which was very fast indeed. The second difficulty was that the slopes of the mountain were haunted by the Rain God's daughters: wild-haired, mischievous sprites who delighted in turning the slopes of the mountain into mud and slippery stones. After Otter's third failed attempt he wound up belly-flopping nearly a league down the mountainside on an impromptu mud slide to be deposited once more into the Celestial River with the loudest and highest splash that Otter had ever made.

Now, mud slides were one of Otter's favorite things and he could not remember a better one than that prepared for him by the Rain God's daughters, but he realized after that third attempt that, fun as this was, he was not going to be able to reach the Rain God this way. He had to think of another path.

Otter puzzled for a while, and when the solution came to him, it seemed so simple that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner. He could not reach the Rain God, but the Rain God's more powerful twin brother was the River God, and he was quite easy to reach ... at least for an otter.

The River God in his true form was a great water dragon who lived in a cave near the base of the Rain God's mountain, where the waters first flowed into the Celestial River. The River God was also of a generally agreeable nature when he wasn't in flood; perhaps he could be persuaded to intercede with his more moody brother, especially since the Rain God was dependent on the River God for his water in the first place. The main danger was the giant whirlpool in the River God's cave, but Otter knew a stone path that would let him avoid that.

"At least," thought Otter, "there's no harm in asking."

Whatever Otter meant to do, he knew he had to do it soon if there was any chance of repaying his debt to Kaiboshi. Evening was already approaching, and the next day was the seventh day of the seventh month, when once more, the rains would surely come.

Otter swam quickly against the current and soon came to the place where the waters emerged from the mouth of the River God's cave to meet the runoff from the Rain God's mountain, there together to form the body of the Celestial River. He dived under the water there and followed the current until he finally surfaced in a large, quiet pool.

There was a distant dull roar that Otter recognized as the maelstrom, and before he dared swim much farther, he slipped out of the water at place where a narrow ledge ringed the pool. Every so often along the cave's wall were rock crystals that glowed like torches, giving weak but adequate light. Otter followed the ledge along the underground river until he came to the place on the far side of the cave where the vast whirlpool churned.

The maelstrom was even larger now than Otter remembered, reaching from one side of the river to the other. The water that escaped it flowed on toward the cave mouth and out into the river, but Otter knew better than to try to swim anywhere near the thing. The currents there were overwhelmingly strong and unpredictable.

The ledge here connected with a larger cavern that served as the River God's palace. Crystalline formations grew from floor and ceiling, serving as pillars and creating chambers within the cave. Otter peered into the crystalline palace but saw nothing. He looked around the cave ledge. "Hello? River God? It is I, Otter."

A spout of water ejected from the center of the whirlpool, and just before it was about to splash into the stone ledge by Otter's feet, it transformed from water into what now appeared to be a handsome young man with jet black hair and dark eyes. It was not often that Otter had seen the River God in his human form, and he didn't recognize him until the man spoke.

"Hello, friend Otter. What brings you to my palace?"

Otter, now that he recognized the Lord of the River, bowed low. "I've come to ask a favor of you, Divine One."

The River God smiled. "Very curious. No offense, but what does Otter require other than the freedom of the river and plenty of fat fish to chase?"

"Ordinarily, My Lord, nothing at all. I'm here because of an obligation I owe to another."

"And who might that be?"

"The Divine Herdsman. Kaiboshi."

"Ah, that one." The River God stopped smiling. "Ask if you will, but I'm not inclined to do anything to the cowherd's advantage."

Otter blinked. "I am surprised to hear this. Has Kaiboshi offended My Lord in some way?"

"Offended? Say rather he possesses something that by right belongs to me, though that need not concern you, friend Otter. Just understand this, and do not take it personally if I refuse your request. Now, then—what is it you wanted of me?"

"To intercede with your brother, the Rain God, so that tomorrow the Bridge of Birds may be formed as the Lord of Heaven decreed."

The River God laughed until the cavern rang with the sound of it. Otter merely waited, feeling a bit confused and uncomfortable, until the sound died down enough for him to be heard again. "Clearly I have said something that amuses you, My Lord. May I ask what that is?"

"Oh, friend Otter," the River God said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Where do you think my brother acquires the extra water he needs to make so much rain across the Plain of Heaven in the first place? Why do you think this whirlpool practically roars with the volume of water flowing through it?"

"I supposed he got the water from you, as the river is the only source of water in the Heavens," Otter admitted. "But I did not know the whirlpool had a part to play in this."

"Underneath the whirlpool is a stone channel that forces water from my domain up to the top of my brother's mountain. I supply it gladly, since he's making it rain on my behalf. Now do you see why I was laughing? In your innocence you've asked me for the one favor in all the Heavens that I cannot and will not grant."

"I see, but I do not understand," Otter said. "How is the suffering of the Divine Herdsman and the Divine Weaver to your advantage? I had not thought you cruel by nature."

The River God glared at Otter. "Cruel? Nonsense. I merely seek what is mine by right, as I said."

Otter blinked. "You seek guardianship of the Divine Ox?"

The River God sighed. "The Ox? Oh, Otter. Go back to your fish; these matters are clearly beyond your understanding."

"It's true that I'm an ignorant creature," Otter said. "But that is not by choice. If you will not grant my request, then at least teach me the reason. If it is not the Ox you covet ... oh."

The River God nodded, smiling. "Now you see. By keeping that lout Kaiboshi and the exquisite Asago-hime apart, I've made certain that Kaiboshi's bargain with the Lord of Heaven will not be kept, and so he will be forced to separate them permanently. And then Asago-hime will be mine, as the Lord of Heaven intended all along. It pains me to cause my beloved any grief, but she will forget her silly infatuation with that oaf in time. I will see to that. Now do you understand?"

Otter thought that, perhaps, he did understand. Finally.

"I had intended to repay my debt to Kaiboshi, but not at your expense, My Lord. No doubt you will make a splendid husband, and your plan is a marvel of cunning simplicity. Was it difficult to obtain your brother's help?"

The River God stroked his chin thoughtfully. "In truth, it was my brother who knew of my frustrated affection for Asago-hime, and he first broached the idea. He's always been the clever sort, and as he said, all he needed was my water to make the plan work."

"Quite ingenious," said Otter. "Yet, if your patience is not yet exhausted, may I ask how did you learn that Asago-hime was intended for you? The Lord of Heaven was quite discreet about his choice."

"Again I must thank my brother," the River God said. "He confided this knowledge to me, though how he obtained it himself he could not say. I think he protects his sources."

"As surely as he protects your interests," Otter said, bowing low again. "As you've already said, these matters are beyond my own poor brain. I had understood the situation differently. Doubtless I was mistaken."

Otter turned to go, but the River God stopped him. "Wait, friend Otter. What do you mean? What were you mistaken about?"

"I must have misheard the Lord of Heaven this morning. Water in my ears or the like. It is nothing."

The River God frowned. "What did he say?"

"Well, I thought he said that Asago-hime had been intended for your brother, the Rain God. But that is quite impossible, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," said the River God, and his eyes were glowing.

"Clearly I was mistaken. Else it would be your brother who really stood to gain if the marriage between Asago-hime and Kaiboshi was dissolved. Is that not right?"

"Yes. Of course," the River God said, with just a bit more emphasis. His eyes were still glowing, and the antlers of his true dragon form had sprouted on the River God's broadening forehead.

"In which case your clever and cunning brother would have been playing you for a fool, and that notion is ludicrous beyond all reason," Otter said, backing away slowly.

"Yes. Of course!!!"

The River God's words changed into an incoherent roar of rage, and stones crashed down from the ceiling. In an instant he fully transformed into the mighty River Dragon. Otter was already across the cavern and poised over the entry pool. "Thank you for your teaching, My Lord," he shouted. "You needn't see me out. I know the way!"

With that he plunged back into the water and swam as only an Otter can swim with the current at his back, until he was well away from the cave of the River God and the Rain God's mountain.

The seventh day of the seventh month dawned cold and stormy. Lightning flashed across the sky, and the winds howled, as indeed they had for much of the night. Otter found Kaiboshi by the river looking, if anything, more forlorn than the last time Otter had seen him. An occasional cold water spray from the river drenched him, and he didn't bother seeking shelter.

"I can stand no more, friend Otter," Kaiboshi said. "I will cross this river today if I have to wade it."

"Being immortal, you won't drown, but you know as well as I that the terms of your bargain will not allow you to cross, save by the Bridge of Birds. You will be swept from one end of the river to the other and back again."

"What else can I do?"

"Summon the Bridge of Birds, Herdsman," Otter said. "After all, it is time."

Kaiboshi waved an arm at the angry clouds, the flashing lightning. "Against this?"

"The wind will howl," Otter said, "but birds are masters of the wind. It will not deter them. Nor are they so high that the lightning will strike them in preference to better targets. Summon the birds. Go visit your wife."

"But ... the rain?"

"It will storm, but it will not rain, Master Kaiboshi," Otter said. "Not this day. Note that the darkest clouds and the worst of the lightning surround the Rain God's far mountain. I believe it will stay there."

"Yes, but what does this mean?"

Otter shrugged. "A family dispute, I believe. It need not concern us. Summon the bridge."

Kaiboshi looked doubtful, but he summoned the birds as was his right under the agreement, and they came. First the cranes to form the anchor pillars at each end, then the waterbirds, then the birds of the air and forests, all obeyed and took their assigned places. They threw their songs back in raucous defiance of the heavens, and the bridge held.

There was an occasional drop of water that might have been blown off the top of the river by the wind, but there was no rain. Slowly, as if unable to believe his good fortune, Kaiboshi crossed the Bridge of Birds. He started carefully, testing each step as if all was an illusion that might collapse at any moment. Then he moved faster and faster until he practically ran across the roadway of feathers to the opposite side. Freed of their burden, the Bridge of Birds burst asunder and scattered, each to their assigned place on the Plain of Heaven, until the following morning when Kaiboshi would summon them again.

Otter watched the bridge become birds again and fly away. "All debts settled," he said happily.

"I gather the brother gods Rain and River are doing the same even as we speak," said a new voice. "I think we have you to thank for this, friend Otter."

Otter looked up to find the Lord of Heaven scowling down at him. "Well, considering the alternative ..." Otter began, but the expression on the Lord of Heaven's face made him think better of it.

"My daughter will be pleased," the Lord of Heaven said, and his scowl lessened somewhat, "and I guess there's some virtue in that ... if she knows what's good for her."

"It's all they wanted," Otter said simply. "And since I don't wish to neglect my own duties, I really should get back to chasing those fish..."

"Stay a moment, friend Otter," said the Lord of Heaven. "All actions have consequences, and yours can be no different."

"I suppose that's just," Otter said, and he sighed. "What is my punishment?"

"I said 'consequences,' friend Otter. Whether it turns out to be a punishment or a reward is not up to me."

The Lord of Heaven reached down into the river and swirled the water with one finger, and in that swirling a figure took shape. One long and lithe with dark brown fur and darker eyes.

"Her name is Kawauso-hime," the Lord of Heaven said.

It was just a name, but with the speaking of that one word Otter finally understood fully and completely why Kaiboshi waited by the river on the seventh day of the seventh month, why the River God and the Rain God were currently lashing at each other both over and under the mountain. He understood why what Kaiboshi and Asago-hime shared was so dangerous, and why he, like them, would never, ever, give it up.

"Do I belong to her or does she to me?" Otter asked, though he didn't really care which. He just wanted to understand.

The Lord of Heaven shrugged. "Both. Neither. That's something you'll have to work out for yourselves," he said.

After the Lord of Heaven was gone, Kawauso-hime looked at Otter with mischief in her eyes. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Otter," said Otter when he could find his voice again. "Do ... do you like to chase fish?"

"It's one thing I like to do," Kawauso-hime said, showing her fine white teeth. "We'll start with that."

And, in flash of fur and a splash of the Celestial River, they were off. ❧

The dark detective with the really cool coat is back in another transdimensional mystery, this time with a large and muddy sidekick named Byron.

Girl in Pieces

BY GRAHAM EDWARDS ILLUSTRATION BY TONY SHASTEEN

I was changing the filter on the coffee machine when two tons of wet clay crashed through my office door. The clay was wearing a yellow municipal jacket and dragging a garbage can. The clay was eight feet tall and bright like a satsuma. The clay was a golem. ● "I thought you apes took the garbage out," I said, clipping the coffee filter back. ● "You a private detective?" said the golem. ● "That's what it says on the door." ● "You gotta help me." The golem held up the hand that wasn't holding the garbage can. It was holding a blood-streaked axe. ● Rain gusted in, driving flecks of orange clay off the golem's legs. The carpet round his feet went dark. ● "Don't they give you waterproofs?" I said. ● "There ain't enough to go round. You gotta fight for them. Little guys like me—we don't stand a chance." ● I started backing up: I don't like golems. "I'll take your word for it. Now, say your piece and get out." ● "But you gotta help me." ● "No, I don't." ● "But I got no place else to go." ● I'd backed up to the filing cabinet. I reached round and pulled open the second drawer. Rummaging blind, I found what I was looking for. I yanked it out and aimed it at the golem. ● "What's that?" said the golem. The clay of his brow sagged to make a frown. ● "Water pistol," I said. ● "You what?" ● "Don't be fooled by the size. The cops use these for crowd control. The clip's got a wormhole feed from the Styx. I pull this trigger, it unloads sixteen tons of river water in about three seconds." ● "Won't that make a mess on your carpet?" ● "That mess will be you, pal. Now get out of my office before I turn you in." ● The golem stood there, still frowning. The rain poured through the door. ● I heard police sirens. ● The golem brought the axe handle down on the garbage can lid. The can rang like a gong. "They found me!" ● I flipped the safety off the water pistol. ● The golem's gigantic head swung from side to side as he searched for an escape route. The cop cars rounded the intersection, sirens screaming. ● My finger tightened on the trigger. ● And that's when the golem dropped to his knees. ● "Please, mister! I ain't done nothing wrong. I know what you people think of us golems. But I ain't like the others. You gotta believe me. You're my last chance. Someone done a terrible wrong and the cops think it's me, but it ain't. And if they take me away, whoever done it they'll get clean away. And that ain't right. That ain't right at all. So, you see, you gotta help. You gotta find out who done it. You gotta put it right. And if you won't do it for me, you gotta do it for her!" ● The golem stood up again. He flicked the lid off the garbage can. It crossed the room like a frisbee. Then the golem picked up the can and emptied its contents on the floor.

A girl came out. She was in pieces: sliced arms and diced legs, chunks of muscle and slops of gore that might have been lungs or liver or lights; spears of white bone like blunk signposts poking out of the whole hideous mess. Handfuls of soft pale flesh slimed with crimson. Worst of all: a pretty face, unmarked except around its ragged edge, floating in a lake of blood.

I put my hand to my mouth. I'm no pussy when it comes to dead bodies, but this was messier than autopsy school.

Outside, six cop cars pulled up with screeching tires.

The golem looked down at the girl's remains. At first I thought his face was melting. Then I saw he was crying.

Each cop car pumped four armed officers into the rain.

And, so help me, I put the water pistol down.

"Shut the door," I said.

"What?"

"You heard me."

The cops had drawn their weapons. They looked a lot nastier than my water pistol. The golem kicked the door shut with a heel the size of a labrador.

"Deadlocks!" I said.

The door obeyed. The room shook as the singularity bolts engaged.

"Will that keep them out?" said the golem.

"Not forever," I replied. "Just long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

"For you to put down that axe and tell me what the hell is going on."

* * *

"I guess you don't like golems. Not many folks do. But we ain't all the same. There's different molds."

The golem rocked from one foot to the other, twisting his muddy hands like a schoolgirl. His vast bulk obscured the mess on the carpet. That was no bad thing.

"Last time I ran into a golem," I said, "he grabbed my ankles and held me upside down over a cloud of toxic gas. Any wonder I'm cagey?"

"Lots of golems are like that. Bad clay. I should know—I have to work with them every day."

It figured. The yellow jacket and the garbage can were a giveaway: this golem was a municipal refuse collector. Garbage golems are dangerous like unstable cliffs: they're fine if you keep clear; get too close—they'll bury you. Literally.

"So what's different about you?"

"I got a name."

"A name?"

"It's Byron."

"Golems don't have names. They have numbers."

"I got something else too."

"What?"

"I got a soul."

* * *

A word about golems.

First, golems aren't born—they're manufactured, like crockery. Most anyone can knock out a golem: you just take a couple of tons of river silt and compress it into a mold. Then you scribble out a chunk of Hebrew binary code on a square of parchment and bury it in the golem's chest. Bingo: instant walking mountain. Golems are grumpy, slow-witted, and obedient. They have phenomenal memories and no conscience at all. They're ultra-loyal and ultra-violent in equal measure. They make great bodyguards and even better tax collectors.

But underneath they're just machines. Wet machines, but machines all the same.

So when a golem tells you he's got a soul, it's kind of hard to take.

Now, you ask a hundred different folk what a soul is, you get a hundred different answers. But there's one thing everyone agrees on: whatever a soul is, it's what a golem ain't got.

Except here's this golem, big as life, says he's just like me. Bigger collar size maybe. Thing is, if this golem thinks he's different, maybe they'll all start thinking they're different. Thinking they don't want to do the crappy jobs any more. Thinking they've got rights. Who knows—maybe they do.

But if all the golems in the city start thinking that ... that's a whole heap of angry clay to have on the loose.

* * *

I stood at the window and watched the cops pile sandbags in the rain. I'd silvered the glass so they couldn't see in.

"Let's forget the soul thing for now," I said. "Tell me about the garbage can. Tell me about the girl."

The golem—it was hard for me to think of him as Byron—sat on the couch. The couch broke. "I was on the morning shift. Down on the east side—you know, those old tenements?"

I nodded. I knew that part of town pretty well. Even the daylight keeps its distance. The tenements are old and mostly ruined. Some have fallen right over, but it doesn't stop folk living in them. Even the ones still boarded up from last year's plague.

"I didn't think the city bothered collecting garbage from the east side."

"We do it once a year. Looks good on the annual report."

"Figures."

"So there I was, collecting garbage, dragging it back to the truck. I like to go out ahead. The other golems stick together but I ... well, I guess I'm a loner. So, I get to this big old brownstone. It's a dive, but there's still a garbage can out front. Funny—even trash throws out the trash." Byron paused. With one massive hand he smoothed his cheeks where the tears had melted them. The golem equivalent of drying his eyes. "So I pick up the can. Only I'm clumsy and the lid comes off. That's when I see what's inside."

"The girl? In pieces?"

"The girl in pieces, right. And the axe lying on top. All at once I'm scared. I dunno what to do. I pick up the axe—dunno why. Then the garbage truck is there, and there's the other golems. They ask me what's wrong. That's when I realize I've been standing there a couple of minutes, just frozen."

"What happened next?"

"Four-Oh-Seven-One—he's shift supervisor—he looks at the axe. Then he looks in the garbage can. He says, 'What did you do to her, you freak?' Then they all back off and Two-Two-Eight-Six says, 'I'm calling the cops!' and that's when I ran."

"Why run if you didn't do anything?"

"I dunno. I panicked. Anyway, I just ran."

"Why didn't you drop the garbage can? Or the axe, for that matter?"

"It's evidence, ain't it? I need it to prove my innocence."

I looked out at the cops. They'd finished piling the sandbags; now they were hunkered down, waiting. I looked at Byron the golem sitting forlorn in the wreckage of my couch. Whichever way you sliced it, this was a doozy of a mess. Best thing I could do was open the door and let the cops do their thing.

I poured myself another coffee.

I forced myself to look at the girl's torn-up remains.

"This tenement on the east side," I said. "Where was it exactly?"

"Cruglin Lane. Does this mean you believe me? You're gonna help?"

"Don't get excited. All it means is, I think you and me should take a little stroll."

"But how are we gonna get out? We'll never get past the cops."

"The front door isn't the only door."

Byron looked at the four blank walls. He scratched his crotch. There was a lot of clay down there.

"You got a back door?"

* * *

Everyone knows there's eleven dimensions. Most places you go, you only see three or four. Maybe five if it's late and the bar's still open. But there's some places where the dimensions ... well, they get kinky.

of crowded up together.

Think of a ball of yarn. However neat it looks, you start unravelling it, sooner or later you'll get a knot. Yarn gets snarled up—it's in its nature. Same with dimensions.

Take this city. It was built right on top of one mother of a cosmic knot. Mostly it looks like a city, but underneath it's got way too many dimensions for its own good. That's why it works the way it does. It's why the cops are all zombies and all the big crime lords are Titans. It's why time runs slower uptown than downtown and the mayor is a gangster-turned-goddess called Pallas Athene. It's why

"I've done messier work, but nothing so pitiful. The worst part was picking up that peeled face. Her dead eyes looked like eggs."

the skies are full of thunderbirds and the sewers have minds of their own. It's why nothing makes sense but everything hangs together. This city's like a knot all right, a knot in the middle of a great spider's web. Only the web's not made of silk, it's made of cosmic string. And whenever the string vibrates it sends all these echoes down into the web, into the knot, into this city. That's what this city is: it's all the sounds of the cosmos, all rolled into one.

Leastways, that's what it says on the tourist leaflet. Me, I just call it home.

The thing is, you also get knots within knots. Something to do with fractals—don't ask me, ask Mandelbrot. Which means that some places in this city get more tangled up than others. This block, for instance. Specifically, this office. This office is just full of dimensions.

And where you get lots of dimensions, you get lots of doors.

• • •

Behind the bookcase there's a trapdoor. I pulled it open and shoved Byron down the cellar steps.

"You got a secret passage?" said the golem. He sounded like a small child with a large voice.

"Eighty-nine of them," I replied, "at the last count."

"It's dark. I don't like the dark."

"Stay there while I get my coat."

I went back up the stairs, grabbed my coat from the hook. I glanced outside and saw two unmarked automobiles scuttle up behind the barricade. Unlike the regular wheeled cop cars, these were the walking variety.

The first auto was a plain brown rust-bucket with stiff steel legs and a lamp hanging off. A wide-shouldered zombie climbed out of it holding a bull horn. A negotiator. So, as far as the cops were concerned, this was a siege.

The second was a Cadillac. It wasn't plain and it wasn't brown. It kissed the far curb on expensive millipede feet. It was sleek as a whale and at least as big. A car for a giant. The screens were mirrored but the driver's window was open a crack. Through the crack, a pair of huge pink eyes stared right at me.

The zombie negotiator lifted the bull horn to what was left of his lips.

"SEND OUT THE MACERATOR! WE KNOW HE'S IN THERE! JUST CO-OPERATE AND YOU'LL BE FREE TO GO!"

Free to go. Right. Like I'd believe someone who has to hold his guts in with gaffer tape.

All the same: the Macerator. It explained why the cops were so keen to collar the golem.

• • •

This city's seen its share of serial killers: Josey Doe, Doctor Eviscerate, the Scalpish Brothers. But they all had short careers. Serial killers get caught pretty quick here: zombies might suck at deduction (their brains are mostly soup) but they're hot on homicide forensics. Show a zombie a corpse, the first thing he does is sniff it. Next, he gives you the name and address of the killer.

But they couldn't catch the Macerator.

The first Macerator killing showed up behind the railhead last year. A male of debatable race was found spread over roughly three square miles of open ground. Since then, the Macerator's struck twenty more times. Each time the victim resembles casserole. And, no matter how much they sniff, the cops are in the dark.

I thought again about turning Byron in. Maybe the golem's story was candyfloss—maybe he was the Macerator. But golems only kill if they're programmed to. Which raised the question: who wrote Byron's code?

I shook my head. Detective or not, I'm not much better at deduction than your average zombie cop.

Difference is, I play a mean hunch.

• • •

I turned my coat inside-out three times until it was made of rubber and used it to scoop the remains of the girl back in the garbage can. I've done messier work, but nothing so pitiful. The worst part was picking up that peeled face. Her dead eyes looked like eggs. And it felt like they were watching me.

Soon there was nothing left but a crimson stain on the carpet. It's got a lot of stains, that carpet, and each one's got a story to tell.

I turned my blood-splattered coat inside-out five times until it was clean, then once more so it was back to moleskin. Then I hauled the garbage can down the cellar steps and took Byron's hand.

"It's still dark," he said. "What's that you dragged down here?"

"Never mind," I said. "Hold tight, big fella."

I squeezed the clay of Byron's hand until it squished between my fingers. Then I teased open a local spatial anomaly, rolled the golem into a ball the size of a tangerine, and dropped him in my pocket. I made an origami scarf of the garbage can and threw it round my neck. Then I picked myself up, folded myself in half, and posted myself through the gap between the furnace and the coal chute.

There were the usual howls as I sliced my way through a pack of boundary wolves (you fold yourself in half, you get a sharp edge) but I soon left them behind. Boundary wolves think they're the protectors of the cosmos but they're just dumb animals. Soon I was between the strings. Time stopped for everything but me and for an instant—just an instant—I heard the distant silence of the still point.

"Jimmy," I whispered. "Are you there?"

Then the boundary was rushing at me again. I cut through another wolf pack and slipped sideways through a fresh crack in reality's wall, all the while with a golem in my pocket and a girl in pieces round my neck.

I landed with a crash on a dust-covered floor and smelt rat droppings.

• • •

Why have you entered my domain?

The voice came from the corner. It wasn't a room, just a dark place with corners. The corners moved. The voice bounced off a ceiling that wasn't a ceiling, just something soft and unspeakable hanging over our heads. The words were punctuated by wet thuds. Something dripping that sounded like jelly, but wasn't.

"I need a favor," I said into the darkness. Beside me, Byron trembled like a sack of plaster.

Favor? Who are you that I owe you a favor?

"Last summer, remember? The missing kid? Pornographic ransom notes and severed fingers in the mail? Cops thought it was you. I convinced them it wasn't."

Ah, that favor. Tell me, was the poor little dear where I said he would be?

"You know he was. Funny how you knew where to find all the pieces."

I explained that a dig time. I am not a killer. I am simply ... attuned to those who kill.

"Yeah, I know."

You shudder?

"A creep's a creep, innocent or not."

Is it with such flattery that you seek a favor? I should turn you from here with your skin burned off and your tongue split in two!

I felt Byron's clammy breath on my ear.

"What is this place," he whispered. "Who're you talking to?"

"Her name is ..." I began. Then I addressed the voice. "Say, why don't you introduce yourself?"

The dark place got brighter. I saw the ceiling and wished I hadn't: it was made of rat-tails all woven together. Most still had the rats attached. It was like some crazy rodent jigsaw: tails strangling necks, tails plaited with drawn intestines, tails threaded through empty eye sockets. The mutilated rats dripped blood and pus on the dusty floor. And they squirmed.

A hunched figure stepped into the light. She was gaunt and yellow, wrapped in red rags. Filthy hair made syrupy trails down her sunken chest. She grinned and cackled, showing black crone's teeth; her breath was so rotten it ran down her chin like blackberry juice.

She scratched her cheek with nails like sewing needles.

Greetings. My name is Arachne.

The golem took a step forward. "Uh, pleased to meet you, Arachne. My name's Byron." Then, so help me, he stuck out his hand.

Arachne's claws knitted the air with streaks of silver light; she looked like a crazed washer-woman up to her elbows in some ghastly laundry basket. The garbage can sang like a steel drum.

"Let's not waste time," I said, stepping in front of him. "Arachne, there's something I need you to do." Glancing at Byron, I hissed, "Don't let her touch you."

"Why not?" said Byron.

"Venom."

Very well, said Arachne. *Call in your favor and begone! Your company is already tiresome. Although, I am curious ... this man of clay does he grow hard when fired?*

I dragged the garbage can forward. Arachne stretched her scrawny neck and peered inside.

Dead already. So sad. If she still breathed, I might help you find her killer. But you have left it too late.

"No," I said. "There's something you can do. You know that."

Arachne's face turned black with surprise. She ran needle-claws through lank hair; giant fleas jumped like field-mice before the scythe.

I am a weaver of silk, not miracles.

"You telling me you can't do it?"

I did not say that. But if I do what you ask, it is you who will owe me a favor.

I thought about it. Arachne's not someone you want to be in debt to. On the other hand, she tends to stay home. I figured so long as I kept my distance, I'd never have to make good on the promise.

Of course, it didn't quite work out like that.

"All right," I said. "Do this and I'll owe you one."

"Do what?" said Byron.

* * *

"So what's her story?" whispered Byron. "She gives me the creeps."

We'd retreated to a safe corner. Well, as safe as any corners are in Arachne's domain.

"Dirty tricks in the underwear underworld," I said. "Arachne used to run an illegal pantyhose sweatshop down by the river. The sweatshop was in direct competition with the shiny new factory Pallas Athene set up in the Diana's Glade Business Park. Now, as you know, Pallas Athene used to be queen of black market lingerie before she turned respectable and became mayor. These days, all PA's businesses are strictly legit. But Arachne never cleaned up her act. So, anyway, story goes Arachne was trying to tried to undercut Pallas Athene on this wholesale lingerie deal. PA caught Arachne in the middle of the night handing over a truckload of bootleg silk teddies under the Green Knight Bridge. Now, PA might look like a doll and she might be mayor but she's got one hell of a temper. There's not many cross her and live to tell the tale. Arachne's one of the few."

"What did Pallas Athene do?"

"Turned Arachne into a spider, banished her into a self-reticulating semi-dimensional oubliette and revoked her weaver's license."

"But ... she don't look like a spider."

"That's just the oubliette at work. As long we're here our perceptions are regulated by Arachne's personal reality grid. Arachne is a spider but she still thinks of herself as a woman. So that's what we see."

Byron shuddered. "Don't like spiders."

"Who does?"

Arachne was waving her hands over the top of the garbage can. Her hands moved fast; as they moved, those needle-claws got longer. Soon the needles were longer than the fingers that held them.

Arachne plunged her hands in the garbage can. Her shoulders worked like pistons. Blood sprayed from the can, painting her face. Arachne's claws knitted the air with streaks of silver light; she looked like a crazed washer-woman up to her elbows in some ghastly laundry basket. The garbage can sang like a steel band. And all the while the patchwork rats looked down with sad eyes, because they knew exactly what was going on.

At last it was over. Arachne pulled her arms out. Her needle-claws were back to normal. Her arms were as red as the rags she wore. Her chin was black with condensed breath.

And the garbage can was shaking.

I took a cautious step toward the can. This time it was Byron who held me back.

"Don't wanna see," he whimpered.

Arachne lifted one scrawny leg and kicked the garbage can over. For the second time that day, the girl spilled out. Only this time she was all in one piece. Above my head, all the rats sighed in unison. Behind me, I heard a colossal thump as Byron fainted.

I had to admit, Arachne had done a beautiful job. Everything was in place, and the girl was a real peach: long legs and a tiny waist, and everything else responding nicely to gravity as she picked herself up. Not a drop of blood on her. Trouble was, good though the needlework was, you could see all the joins.

Eleven thousand, three hundred and ninety-five discrete pieces, said Arachne. *A triumph, even for me.*

I wondered if the girl would see it that way. It's one thing coming back from the dead. It's another finding you look like a patchwork quilt. I wondered if I'd done the right thing.

"I'm alive," said the girl. She held up her arm, examined the red, cross-stitched scars. She looked down at the rest of her naked body. It looked like a road atlas, each highway drawn in herringbone weave. "That's pretty neat," she said. "I always figured I'd get tattoos one day. A girl like me can earn ten times as much with tattoos. I just hate needles. But now it's done, and I didn't feel a thing. How cool is that?"

I shrugged off my coat, threw it around the girl's shoulders. Pretty as she was, I couldn't bear looking at those scars. At least on her face

there was just the one—even if it did run all the way round the edge.

I kicked Byron until he woke up. When he saw the girl he nearly fainted again.

"Time to go, big fella," I said.

The girl turned to Arachne and beamed. "Thanks a bunch, old woman. What do I owe you?"

Arachne smiled too, but not at the girl.

You don't owe me anything, young lady.

"Come on," I muttered, grabbing a handful of clay and a handful of needlework, "let's get out of here."

Not so fast, gumshoe.

Something slapped the back of my neck. I tried to bat it away but my hand stuck fast. I heard a scraping sound. I looked down: it was my shoes sliding across the floor.

With a glue-tipped rope of pure spider silk, Arachne reeled me in.

Three seconds later I was cocooned. Silk rigging upended me and buried my feet in the rat-tail ceiling. The rats gave way, squeaking in fury. And there I hung, blood filling up my head, watching Arachne stride toward me.

I like my debts paid promptly, she said, grinning to show her rotten teeth.

"All right." At least the cocoon didn't cover my mouth. "You got me. But let them go."

They are free to leave whenever they please.

"Uh," said Byron, "we don't know how."

"Come here," I said. Arachne watched with interest as the golem edged up to where I was hanging. "Collar pocket. There's a zipper."

Byron rummaged in my shirt and took out a gray cube the size of a craps die.

"What's this?"

"Spare dimensions. I keep them for emergencies. You got six to play with there—one per side. It's a one-shot thing though: you only get to use each side once."

"This will get us out of here?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"What about you?"

"I'll figure something out."

"No, I mean, how will we solve the case without you?"

"For a minute I thought you cared. Look, you got the girl back. Quiz her. Ask her what happened. Then ... maybe you'll figure something out."

Byron stared at the dimension-die. It looked tiny in his huge, clay hands.

"Thanks," he said. His cheeks were going soft again. "I mean it. And I'll look after her."

"Get out of here, big fella," I said.

That's when Arachne set me spinning like a kebab. Through the blur, I saw Byron take the girl's hand. He rolled the die. There was a hollow pop and they were gone.

♦♦♦

She let me spin long enough so I threw up. Trust me, when you're upside down, vomit lingers.

How does it feel to be a prisoner? Arachne said when I'd stopped spinning. I groaned. My sinuses had taken an acid bath and the whole world was doing the Peppermint Twist.

"Just ... tell me ... what you want," I managed to croak.

It's very simple, gumshoe. I want out of this place.

I closed my eyes. This was going to be bad.

"You know I can't do that. Only Pallas Athene can authorize your release. My hands are tied."

In case you hadn't noticed, you're all tied. But that is academic. You can do it. You know you can. And ... we made a deal.

"So the only way to keep you sweet is by getting PA pissed? Where's the incentive? I'd rather cross you than her. No offense."

None taken. Nevertheless, what you are failing to recognize is that getting PA pissed, as you so delicately put it, is exactly the end result I wish to achieve. It is time someone taught our so-called mayor a lesson. Pallas Athene may think she's respectable now she wears that fancy shield, but I remember when she was a snot-nosed brat burning kittens with a magnifying glass. No wonder she thought it was a step up the career ladder when she started turning tricks in the back alley of the Hyperion Casino! How she became a public servant I shall never know! All I can say is, behind that porcelain skin and regal gaze lurks the mind of a monster!

Arachne shivered, composed herself.

All of which means that I understand completely your reluctance to set yourself up in opposition to a woman even the Titans cross the street to avoid. So let me put this simply.

Arachne leaned close. The rags she wore fell away, exposing flesh like over-ripe Stilton. Instead of breasts, Arachne had a pair of twitching spinnerets. Silk oozed from them in milky strings. Crimson spider-legs dangled from her waist: they caressed her human thighs like eager schoolboys. The stench of her was unbearable.

You will use your dimensional talents to release me from my prison. In return, I will give you my protection. From your point of view, it is a calculated risk. In making your calculation, I urge you to consider the alternative.

Arachne stroked her spinnerets with her needle-claws. They spurted in unison. Clots of silk rolled down her belly like silver tumbleweeds. She squeezed the spinnerets harder and suddenly the silk was squirting into my face, my eyes. The silk crawled up my nose and into my tear ducts, scoured its way through to the skin of my brain where it latched on, and squeezed.

I felt a billion tiny spider eggs hose into my skull. I felt the eggs hatch. I felt Arachne's babies weave themselves into a living facsimile of my brain, each spiderling a synapse in the gestalt spider-mind. And every single thought the spider-mind had was a hot spear of pain. Then the spiderlings had babies, and the babies had more babies, and my brain swelled up until it was all that was left of me, and it was all made of spiders. But somewhere inside it was still me, and I was just one vast chattering web of pain.

Arachne pressed her spinnerets flat. The silk leaped back out of my head. My sinuses felt like they'd been shot-blasted. It was better when they were full of vomit. I swung there, retching. The rats gnawed at my shoes, lashing their tails in excitement.

So, said Arachne, *what is it to be? Will you risk the wrath of Pallas Athene? Or will you consign yourself to being a living host for the insane children of the spider woman?*

"Do I get a third option?"

Arachne gathered up her rags and stalked into the shadows.

You have ten minutes to decide.

♦♦♦

I wished I hadn't given my coat to the girl. That coat's got teeth. As soon as Arachne's silk hit the hem, the coat would have turned it to confetti. Still, someone had to cover her up.

But thinking about the coat gave me an idea.

I closed my eyes and tried an inter-brane trance. I'm not usually good at psychic connections, but this was my coat we were talking about. We went way back, my coat and me. It had to work.

At first all I could hear was the baying of the boundary wolves, forcing me back. I tried just running for it, but I couldn't get past them—Arachne's silk straight-jacket stopped me doing the moves. I was stuck here all right, just like Arachne.

But even though my body was trapped, some piece of my mind must have slipped through. Because suddenly I could hear a familiar sound. It started faint, in the distance, then it got loud and close.

The gurgle of a coffee pot. My coffee pot.

I tried opening my eyes. But I didn't have any.

I was a coat.

♦♦♦

I couldn't see, but I could smell ...

... hot java, brewed just how I like it.

And I could touch

warm, soft, skin laced through with thousands of tiny ribbed carriageways. I felt a human pulse beating under pliable flesh, felt myself ride across intimate curves and bury myself in tantalizing creases, felt the smooth slithering of me over a living, naked skin, which was her skin, of course: the skin of the resurrected girl.

I'm a coat, I thought.

And I was.

I let the sensations rule me. Inter-brane trances are fragile. You just have to relax. The more you immerse yourself, the stronger the link becomes. So I clung to the girl. It wasn't so bad.

And I could hear

their voices, Byron's and the girl's. The girl's name was Nancy. They were deep in discussion. I let my velvet lining slide over Nancy's scarred and sensual collarbone and listened in ...

* * *

"I was born on the east side," Nancy said. "I don't go back there much now. But this job came up and I knew the neighborhood. It doesn't scare me down there, so I went."

"So what do you actually do?" said Byron.

"I work for Godiva Couriers. It's regular courier work, only I go on horseback and don't wear any clothes. I've got a license."

"Oh. I see. Isn't that ... dangerous?"

"I have several swords."

"Where do you hide them?"

"That would be telling."

"Oh. So, what happened then? When you made this delivery."

I felt Nancy shiver beneath me. "Well, I got a call to collect a package from this address on Crucifix Lane. Documents or something. The package was going all the way up to the mountain and the client wanted to make an impression. That's usually why people want to use Godiva."

"You sure do make an impression," mumbled Byron.

"Why, thank you. Anyway, I got to the address, railed my horse, and knocked on the door. Nobody answered, so I pushed it open and went inside. Inside ... it was odd. The building had, I don't know, maybe twelve floors. Or rather, it used to. Someone had gutted it, taken out all the floors so it was just one big space, floor to ceiling. Just a shell. It was wild, like walking into a giant's house. It was dark so I couldn't see if anyone was in there with me. So I called out. And that's when ..."

"When what?"

"When something came out of the darkness and sliced me into a thousand pieces."

"Something? Or someone?"

"I don't know. But whatever it was, it was big and it had pink eyes ..."

Nancy's voice grew faint. Suddenly I couldn't feel her under me anymore. I was flapping like laundry on the line. Only the line was a silk thread, reeling me in. It dragged me back between the strings, back through the boundary where the cosmic wolves howl, back to where I was hanging upside-down from a ceiling made of rats.

I had time for one thought: that golem makes a fair detective. Then I hit my body like a slam-dunk and passed out.

* * *

When I came to, Arachne was doing the spinneret thing again. I tried not to look.

"All right," I said. "I'll do it. I'll get you out of here. But on one condition."

Another bargain? Is this to be our relationship, gumshoe? An ever-escalating sequence of deals and debts? Where will it end?

"It ends here and now. This is the last deal I'll ever make with you. Take it or leave it."

Arachne closed her rags over her spinnerets and scowled: *What is it you want?*

"The girl."

The spider woman changed. Suddenly she wasn't a crone any more. She straightened up and smoothed out. Got beautiful. Her rags became a tiny red dress so tight it showed her pores. She looked like a loaded gun in a crimson holster.

Well, she said, seeing my surprise. *I'll need to look good if I'm going to be seen outside.*

"So that's a yes?"

Arachne started unslitting the cocoon. *You know the girl won't hold together. She was butchered, gumshoe. My needlework is good, but it cannot repair her soul. Her soul is in shreds and there is nothing I can do about that. Oh, sewing her up like that is a good trick ... but it is just a trick. Give the girl a day or two, and she will start to come apart at the seams. Literally.*

"You think I don't know that?" I said.

I just wanted to make sure you understand the small print.

The last of the cocoon gave way. I dropped to the floor. Above me, the rat-ceiling sighed.

"I understand it," I said, massaging my arms. "So where d'you want to go?"

* * *

"Hold your fire!" I shouted. "We're coming out!"

I unlatched the singularity bolts and led them out into the rain: Byron the golem, Nancy the stitched-up courier, and Arachne. Twenty-four zombie cops trained their guns on us. The zombie with the bull horn said:

"PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS!"

"We're not carrying," I said.

"PUT UP YOUR HANDS!"

"No need," I said. "The girl's okay. See for yourself."

Nancy came forward. When she stepped over the cellar vent, a jet of steam briefly lifted the coat above her shoulders. One of the zombie negotiator's eyes popped out and hit the street with a splat.

"MA'AM? ER. ARE YOU THE SAME NANCY LEE DONAHUE, FORMER EMPLOYEE OF GODIVA COURIERS, WHO WAS BRUTALLY HACKED TO PIECES AND HIDDEN IN A GARBAGE CAN OUTSIDE NUMBER EIGHT-EIGHT-SEVEN CRUCIFIX LANE, EAST SIDE?"

"One and the same," said Nancy. "Say—how come you know who I am? You never exactly got a chance to ID my body."

This confused the zombie. He lowered the bull horn and glanced across the street. Straight at the whale-sized Cadillac. The rest of the cops looked that way too. We all looked that way.

The door of the Cadillac swung open. A pair of shapely calves came out, each as big as a man. The calves belonged to a thirty-nine-foot goddess wearing a golden cloak. Hanging from her hip was a machete the size of a small ship's rudder. Her skin was white and her eyes were pink. On her breast was a shield with a gorgon's head in the middle.

Her flower-decked crown bore the initials: PA.

"Pallas Athene!" said Byron.

The goddess pulled the lens caps off the gorgon's eyes. Twenty-five zombies turned to stone. The rest of us were lucky; just as the gorgon's eyes came on Arachne jumped in front of us and dropped her disguise. A gigantic red spider burst out of that tiny dress like an eight-legged life-raft. It was so big it blotted out everything up to the skyline.

The spider advanced.

Pallas Athene snarled and puffed out her chest. Two of Arachne's legs had already turned to stone, but the gorgon shield was heavy, and had a narrow angle of fire. Arachne was over the sandbags and ripping the shield from Pallas Athene's breast before the goddess could correct her aim. The shield landed two hundred yards down the street, facing up; seconds later it was crushed beneath a stone thunderbird with a surprised look on its face.

Then it was just a grappling match. Pallas Athene clawed Arachne's eyes—she had eight to choose from; Arachne wrapped her opponent's legs in silk and pulled them out from under her. To begin with, Pallas Athene was on top. But Arachne was mad—the kind of mad you only get from stewing in a self-reticulating semi-dimensional oubli-

She writhed, tore off my coat, clutched at the scars on her arms and legs. It didn't take a medic to see what was up. Like Arachne said: the poor girl was coming apart at the seams.

ette for seven years. She waved her spinnerets like a samurai waves his katana. Soon flowers were flying from Pallas Athene's crown. Once the goddess had dropped her machete she didn't stand a chance.

Last I saw, Arachne was headed for the docks with Pallas Athene cocooned on her back. Word is she's still down there, holed up in a derelict warehouse. One thing's for sure, she won't run short of food. When you string up a goddess by her feet and liquefy her insides, you get enough ambrosia for about a billion years.

As for me, I was just glad the debt was cleared.

Then I looked at Nancy, and remembered things weren't so good after all.

♦♦♦

"I feel peculiar," said Nancy. She sank to her knees, clamped her hands across her belly.

"Get her inside," I said to Byron. While he picked her up, I checked the street. The petrified zombies stared through the rain like museum exhibits. The stone thunderbird tipped over and broke a wing. Nothing else moved.

"What's wrong with her?" said Byron when I got back inside. He'd laid Nancy on the carpet. She was turning blue.

"I'm fine," groaned Nancy. "What the hell was that all about? Was I really murdered by the biggest goddess on the block?"

"Yeah. I put it together just before I brought Arachne out of the oubliette. But it was Byron who asked you all the right questions."

"I did?"

"How do you know what questions he asked me?" said Nancy. She winced, bit her lip, drew blood. But her eyes were bright: the girl was a fighter.

I figured she'd need to be.

"Long story," I said. "I'll tell it when there's more time. But you're right, Pallas Athene was the Macerator. She's always had a violent streak. Comes from her gangster roots—she used to go round wearing a Titan's skin, you know that? Anyway, going respectable must have cramped her style. When you're mayor you can't go around hacking people up anymore. So she got herself a hobby."

"A hobby?"

"Some folk surf. Some paint toy soldiers. Pallas Athene—she took up serial killing."

"How come she never got caught?"

"When you're mayor, the cops tend to do what you say. Especially when you've got a gorgon on your chest."

Byron scratched his massive head. "But ... if they knew it was her all along, why did they bother coming after me?"

"Who knows? Maybe PA figured it was time the Macerator retired. Maybe it was all a set-up—she did plant that axe with the body, after all. Probably knew a garbage collector would end up taking the heat. Nobody cares if a golem goes down. Tough but true. I figure you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Either way," said Nancy, "that bitch got what she deserved."

"Amen," said Byron.

Then Nancy started screaming. She writhed, tore off my coat, clutched at the scars on her arms and legs. It didn't take a medic to see what was up. Like Arachne said: the poor girl was coming apart at the seams.

"Didn't last as long as Arachne thought," I said.

"What?!" said Byron. "You mean ... you knew this would happen? You got her all sewed up and you knew she'd come to pieces again?"

"If it's any consolation," I said, "I wish I hadn't. Seems you can stitch the body but you can't stitch the soul. Still, it got you off the hook."

"I'd rather be on the hook! What can we do?"

Nancy shrieked and snapped her back like a trout. She flipped on her front, landing exactly where she'd first landed when Byron poured her out of the garbage can. That time she'd been in pieces. Any minute now, she'd be in pieces again.

"There's something," I said. "But it's risky. And I've never seen it done. It's ... well, call it a hunch."

"What is it!" said Byron. "I'll do anything!"

"You might not want to do this."

♦♦♦

He didn't hesitate. He didn't even ask me why. He just lay down and told me to get on with it.

Golems—you think you got them figured, but they just keep pulling surprises.

I'd grabbed Pallas Athene's machete from the street. I used it to cut a deep gouge in Byron's chest. It wasn't hard: there was nothing in there but orange river clay. I groped through silt and grit. I found a pretty shell, left it where it was. At last I found what I'd been looking for. I pulled it out.

A muddy square of parchment. Written on it, in Hebrew binary, was the code that made Byron tick.

"Do ... it ... quick ..." croaked Byron. Without his code, his eyes were rolling. The floor shook as his system crashed.

I tore the parchment in half. Byron convulsed.

I put one half of the parchment back in Byron's open chest. His body went limp. I rolled Nancy on her back. She was blue all over; black fluid leaked from her scars. We were nearly out of time.

I bent over her, latched my fingers into one of the big scars on her chest. Then I peeled her open.

I didn't look inside. The stench of decay was appalling. That and the awful, liquid feel of her. She was going to pieces, fast. Eyes shut. I thrust the second half of the parchment under what was left of her ribs. Her lungs billowed over my knuckles; her heart drummed like a scared rabbit against my wrist. I let go the parchment, pulled my hands out, pressed the edges of the scar together. I opened my eyes, held my breath.

Nancy lay still. Her skin was one big bruise. Her scars looked like a black spider's web.

Then she convulsed, coughed up white froth, started breathing. Pink heat flooded her skin, she opened her eyes and pushed my hands away.

"Get your hands off my chest, pervert!" she said.

I looked over at Byron. He was resculpting his pectorals.

"You okay?" I said.

"I feel ... just the same," he said.

"That's the thing with golem binary code," I said. "Ripping it up doesn't hurt it. It's neat technology. Especially since it shouldn't work at all, on account of the Hebrew numerical system not having any zeroes."

"Come again?"

"No zeroes. So they have to make the code nullatorily recursive."

"Huh?"

It's simple: every phrase in the code points down to a smaller phrase buried in the previous line. And that smaller phrase points down to a smaller phrase still. The recursion is infinite, so even though there's no zeroes you get an infinite number of holes where a zero could fit. So the programmers just write the rest of the code around those holes and the SGOS—that's the standard golem operating system—fills in the gaps. It interpolates the places where the programmers want the

Continued on page 90

The Dinosaur Diaries

SOMETIMES WHO YOU REALLY ARE
TURNS OUT TO BE FAR LESS IMPORTANT
THAN WHO YOU ARE TRYING TO BE

Ma found the dinosaur tracks shortly after supper. ● Ashley and I were crouching in the cornfields, my hands inching under her bra. The sun was down, but the last remnants of hazy purple light clung to the overcast sky. Ashley was moaning and contorting her body toward me, and I thought maybe this was one of those rare times she would want to go all the way, when Ma's shrill cry silenced the chirping crickets. Normally I would have been pretty p-o'd at having her interrupt my private time with Ash, especially when I had a hard-on the size of a Buick, but her cry was too real to feel anything but dread. ● There was only one other time Ma had cried like that—when she found Pa face down in the barn one winter morning two years ago, stone dead from a heart attack. ● I pulled away from Ashley, her long blond hair brushing against my nose. Her eyes were wide. We pushed through the head-high cornstalks back to the road and ran in the twilight toward the old barn. That's where Ma had been doing her night-wandering the last few weeks. The lingering heat of the day still clung to the air, but it was cooling fast, goose bumps prickling my bare arms. ● "Ma?" I called. ● We had reached the backside of the gray-weathered barn, and there were ominous gaping holes in both the roof and the sides. Big and boxy, the barn looked like a ghostly ship afloat on a sea of corn, a great rolling green sea that stretched up the gentle rise to the horizon. Our house was a quarter mile in the opposite direction, this barn all that was left from the fire that leveled our first home when I was a baby. My oldest brother, Harry, died in that fire. Ma and Pa couldn't find him, and when it was all over the firemen discovered his body in the back of his closet, where he must have gone hiding when he saw the flames. People always tell me Ma was never the same after that.

BY [illegible]ET WILLIAM CARTER ● ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC FORTUNE

I was panting from the run—I was on the heavy side, and even a short dash left me winded—and I held my breath so I could listen. She didn't answer. Ashley adjusted her bra underneath her t-shirt. I was about to yell again when Ma cried out a second time. I followed her voice into the stalks, running full tilt, and very nearly plowed right into her. When I skidded to a halt, Ashley crashed into me, and then both of us went down at Ma's feet.

I spat out the dry, bitter dirt. Ma stood with her back to me. She was a big woman, bigger still since Pa died, and her white robe stretched tight across her back. The robe was pretty much all she wore, that and Pa's old army boots. Because she had shaved her head a week earlier, something she did two or three times a month when it struck her fancy, she had only a brown stubble of hair. The underside of her right arm was pink and splotchy in a webbed pattern, like a fleshy imitation of reptile scales. It was the scar that remained from when she ran through a wall of fire into my nursery all those years ago.

"Oh my," I heard her whisper.

"Ma?" I said.

When Ma didn't answer, I stood and helped Ashley do the same, then we both edged on either side of Ma. I saw right away what had so alarmed her.

An area of stalks about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle had been flattened. That wasn't what bugged me out, though. What bugged me out was the indentation in those flattened stalks, an indentation about three feet long and two feet wide with three front claws and a single back one. Anyone could tell right off that it belonged to

An area of stalks about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle had been flattened. That wasn't what bugged me out, though.

something larger than an elephant, maybe three or four times as large, but I knew from Pa's books exactly what kind of creature had left those tracks—or at least what kind of creature someone wanted us to think had left them. As far as anyone knew, there was only one fossilized track that had ever been found, and this track was nearly an exact match.

A Tyrannosaurus rex.

"Check for others," Ma said, her voice choking.

"Ma—" I began.

"Check! Check!"

She began sobbing and Ashley put an arm around her. In something of a daze, I searched the stalks nearby, but didn't find any other indentations. I returned to the track and knelt beside it. It looked authentic, all right. The indentation was at least six inches deep in the soil at the toes, but only an inch or two deep at the heel. That made sense, because most paleontologists believed the T-Rex walked on its toes like a bird. Somebody had tried real hard to get the details perfect.

A cool breeze made the stalks around us shake and shimmy.

"You find any?" Ma asked in a quiet voice.

"No," I said.

The most obvious person behind the stunt would have been Ma, of course, but it would have taken something heavy, some big oil drums, maybe, and Ma got tired just lifting a jug of milk. But it had to be somebody who knew about Pa's fascination—some would say obsession—with dinosaurs, and Pa hadn't been the socializing type. In fact, I once overheard a hired hand joke to his girlfriend on the phone that Gary B. Dellanger must have been the only known hermit with a family.

So that left Ma, my little sister Harriet, and my older brother Chuck. Since Harriet never left the house unless the power was out, and Chuck, who was in college in Des Moines, told me on the phone he would rather ice skate in hell than come home, Ma was the most likely culprit.

Most likely, maybe, but not really likely at all.

"I think somebody," I said, choosing my words carefully, "is playing a trick on us."

"It's real," Ma said. "I saw it in a dream. It's real. It's a real dinosaur."

"Ma, it's only one track."

"It's your father. I saw this coming. I prayed for it."

She started crying again. Ashley rubbed her shoulders and made shushing sounds as you would to a crying baby. In some ways Ma looked a lot like a baby. There was the lack of hair, of course. She also had a puffy, round face, her features softly defined in that way that all baby's features are softly defined until they grow into toddlers. But with Ma, she did have distinctive characteristics (I had seen how she looked in her wedding album), but that face was hard to see under all the insulation.

"Ma," I said, "you should go inside."

"He's coming," she said. "He wants to help me. He was always there to help me and he wants to help me again."

"Now!" I snapped.

Ashley gave me a look—one of those how could you talk to your mother that way sort of looks—and turned Ma toward the house. "Let's go inside, Mrs. D," she said. "I'll make you some nice hot chocolate."

Ma went willingly, but she was mumbling the whole way. I bent down beside the track and impulsively touched the crushed stalks. My hand wasn't there a second before I jerked it back.

The track was cold, much colder than it had a right to be.

It took Ma a good hour to calm down, and by then it was time to put her to bed. We turned off The Wheel of Fortune—it was better than a sedative for Ma—and Ashley helped me take her upstairs. I had cleaned her room that morning, but Ma had pretty much made a mess of it. That was normal.

Her crayon drawings covered the queen bed, the two dressers, and most of the floor. None of them looked like anything recognizable, just lots of colors and shapes. It was something she started after Pa died. She was still murmuring when I laid her down, but she was asleep by the time I tucked the sheets up to her double chin. I turned off the light, turned on her amber Navaho nightlight, and left the door open three inches just the way she liked it. At the other end of the dark hall, past my bedroom and Chuck's bedroom, both of which were dark, there was a blue strip of flickering light under Harriet's door.

"Should we tell her about it?" Ashley whispered.

"Nah," I said. "I'll tell her later."

After we cleaned up the rest of the dinner dishes, I walked her out to her Ford Ranger. The sky was dark and there was a fine mist in the air. Her tires still didn't have hubcaps. I had given her new ones for her birthday, but she hadn't gotten around to putting them on. I didn't know what to make of that. The truck was white, but you couldn't tell because of how much mud was caked to it. Going mudding—which pretty much consisted of driving around in muddy fields like a mad person—was one of Ashley's favorite activities. It also made her real horny, which of course made it one of my favorite activities, too.

She opened the door and climbed in, looking out at me through the open window. She was eighteen, a few months older than me. Her best feature was her big green eyes—elf eyes, Ma called them—and her face was kinda heart-shaped, with large cheekbones and a pointy chin. She said she was plain looking, but I didn't believe it.

There was no more horniness in her eyes this night, though. What was left was a look of sorrow and sympathy, the way you might look at a three-legged spaniel that's trying to play with the other dogs. And she was looking that way at me.

"You think she did it herself?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied, and I really didn't. I was also thinking about how cold the track had felt when I had touched it.

She gripped the steering wheel, looking out the front window as if she was already on the road. "Who else could have done it? Who else would have done it?"

"You got me."

She shook her head. I didn't know if she was shaking her head at Ma or at me. Maybe both.

"You think any more about next month?" she asked.

Next month was when Ashley was moving to California, to start at the University of Santa Barbara in the fall. We had been together for about three years, serious for about two. For the last ten months, she had been trying to convince me to come with her. It irritated her to no end I hadn't even applied for any colleges, especially with my grades and SAT scores. Top of the class. Not that I had really tried. I guess that was one of the things I got from Pa. Book stuff always came easy.

"A little," I said.

"And?"

The breeze picked up and I looked out at the corn. In the near total darkness, I couldn't see much but shadows, but the fields moved as if waves were passing over them. At least that's what I imagined. I had never seen the ocean except on television.

"I want to go," I said, and that was the truth.

"But?"

"It's just ... well, you know ..."

"Jerry, you can't put your life on hold."

"Yeah."

"You're smart. Way too smart to stay here. You can't run this place by yourself, anyway. And your Ma's gotten a lot worse since your Pa died."

"Yeah." Our last hired hand, Ben, had left two months earlier when Ma told him to go seek his life's purpose. I had argued with her, but she wouldn't have anything of it. Besides, we wouldn't have been able to afford him anyway, what with her donating most of our money to all of her crazy organizations, another thing she started after Pa died. Harvest was coming up in October, and I was dreading it. "Yeah, I know. I just ... She won't leave, Ash. And there's Harriet, too. As soon as Chuck comes back to help—"

"That's not happening and you know it."

I nodded. That was one thing that did make me mad, Chuck not willing to do his part. The last few months, he hadn't even returned my calls. But what was there to say? It was what it was.

I was leaning against her door, and she reached out and placed both of her hands over mine. Her hands were soft and warm. She didn't work on a farm like me. Her Pa owned the general store where we bought most of our groceries. "Jerry," she said, "you know I want you to come with me. But if you don't ... "

Her eyes teared up, and I felt a tightening in my chest. She didn't have to say the rest. If I didn't come with her, she wasn't going to sit around pining for me.

Ashley looked away and quickly started the engine. She hated to cry almost as much as she hated to wear a dress. "Let me know how your Ma's doing tomorrow," she said, and then put the truck in gear and drove away.

I wanted to look at the track again, but it was too dark. I parked myself on the easy chair in the family room and endured one of Timothy Dalton's unfortunate turns as James Bond, then moseyed upstairs a little before eleven. The hardwood floors were cool under my bare feet. When I saw that the blue light was still under Harriet's door, I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I needed to tell her about the dinosaur track, but I was hoping to put it off until the next day. Now there was no reason to wait.

I eased open the door. I could only see her bunk bed and her bureau, awash with the flickering light. The computer was around the corner. Posters of all the Pokemon characters covered the walls. She hadn't played Pokemon in years.

"Harriet?"

I heard a few clicks of the keyboard. "I'm busy."

"Can I just talk to you for a minute?"

"Later."

"It's important."

She sighed. "Fine."

She hunched over her keyboard in the corner, her legs tucked underneath her on the swivel chair. She didn't look up when I entered. Her red hair was braided into a pony tail and stuck out through the back of her black baseball cap. Her ten-year-old body was painfully thin, the Spider-man t-shirt and purple pajama bottoms barely hanging on her body. She had always been thin, but since Pa died she almost never ate, no matter how often I bugged her about it.

A chess game was in progress on her monitor, and only a handful of pieces were left on the board. I watched as the black queen darted diagonally across the board and took the rook. It would be my sister's queen. She always played black.

"Take that," she said.

I stood off to the side of the desk so I could see her face. She had the hollowed-out look you see on the faces of starving Africans in the pages *National Geographic*, her eyes deep sockets, her skin stretched tight against her cheekbones. If not for the emaciated look, though, she looked a lot like Ma did back in her yearbook. The hair she had gotten from Pa.

"I gotta tell you something," I said.

She clicked the keyboard a few times. "Bishop to Queen 8. This guy's good."

"It's something you should know," I continued. "I don't know what it means, but ... well, Ma found this track out in the corn. It looks a lot like a dinosaur track. A T-Rex track, actually."

Her only reaction was to squint more intently at the monitor.

"It's not real, obviously," I said. "Somebody put it there. It may have even been Ma, though I doubt it."

"It wasn't her," Harriet said.

"Well, I don't really think it was her, but it was definitely . . . " I trailed off, her words finally registering. "What do you mean? You know something about this?"

"Knight takes bishop. I got 'em now."

"Harriet."

She bit down on her bottom lip.

"Harriet," I said, more insistently. "Harriet, if you know something ... You didn't do it, did you?"

She snorted and finally looked at me. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know, but—"

"It's stupid," she said, turning back to the monitor. "I mean, if he wants to talk to her, he should just talk to her. Not do stupid stuff like this."

I felt as if somebody had taken an ice cube and dropped it into the pit of my stomach.

"Who wants to talk to her?"

"Pawn to Rook eight!" she exclaimed. "I never saw that one coming!"

"Who?" I repeated.

"Well, Pa of course. Who else? I think I'll go with a castle move. Yeah, that should be good."

Dumbstruck, I stared at her. "What do you mean? Have you ... talked to him?"

"Well, duh," she said, typing away.

"How? By phone?"

"Nah. On the computer."

"You can talk to him on the computer?"

She shook her head. "You're messing up my concentration. This guy has already beaten me twice."

"When does he talk to you on the computer?"

"He doesn't talk real talk, stupid. You can't do that in the game.

"You play chess with him?"

"Mostly he just stops by when I'm playing other people, says hi and stuff. People can send messages in the all-chat area." She nodded at the monitor. "Yeah, I figured he'd take my pawn. Asshole."

I looked at the monitor. I was afraid some jerk-off was pretending to be Pa, hoping to seduce my sister. "How do you know it's really him?" I asked.

"Cause he knows stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just stuff, okay."

"No, it's not okay. I need to know about this, Harriet. This could be somebody dangerous."

She glared at me. "It's him, Jerry. He knows about the time you went swimming at Yankee Pond and knocked your head on the rock. He knows about how I used to have bad nightmares about the corn monsters when I was a little and how he used to sing me to sleep. It's him. He's the one who told me about the track. He said he was going to leave it for Ma to find. I told him it was dumb, but he didn't listen."

I swallowed away the coal-sized lump in my throat. She hadn't convinced me it was Pa. What she had convinced me was that this predator knew a lot of stuff about us, which was even weirder.

"When did this start?" I asked.

"A couple weeks ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

She turned back to her game. "It didn't seem like a big deal."

"Somebody's pretending to be our dead Pa and it didn't seem like a big deal?"

I could see her jaw muscles tightening. "I don't care if you believe me or not. I just want to finish my game, okay?"

"You need to get some sleep."

"After I finish this."

"We'll talk more about this tomorrow."

She waved me away. Angry, I contemplated shutting her computer off, but I knew no good would come of it. I walked to the door, feeling queasy about what she had told me. I didn't want to believe it was Pa, told myself it was impossible, but even then part of me knew that something far stranger than an Internet predator was going on here.

As I was closing the door behind me, she spoke.

"Did you ever play chess with him?"

I looked back at her. She was still gazing at the monitor. "A couple times," I said. "Chuck played with him more often. It wasn't something I liked very much."

"Well, he sucks," she said. "Does dumb things for no reason. It's almost like he's trying to lose. You don't play chess like that. You play to win. Always to win."

She said it fiercely, as if to suggest otherwise was an insult to chess players everywhere. I shut the door, and as I headed back to my dark room, I thought about all the times Pa had lost to Chuck and me. In fact, I could never remembering him winning even once. I always assumed it wasn't because he couldn't win, but because he couldn't bear to see us lose.

One of my earliest memories of Pa involved dinosaurs. That wasn't unusual. Nearly all of my memories of Pa had to do with dinosaurs in one way or another, since that was one of the few things that he liked to talk about.

It was just after supper, and the sun was creeping its way down to the white-washed horizon. Me and Chuck walked with Pa along our drive, the frozen snow crunching under our boots, our breaths frosting and blowing back hot on our faces. The telephone poles along the main road up ahead were the only thing breaking up all that white.

"My face hurts," Chuck sniveled. He was still nursing a cold. "I want to go inside."

Pa didn't answer, but he did grip my hand more tightly. I was six, Chuck ten. Harriet was not yet born. We had been living in the new house, the house we built after the fire, for just over five years. I remember how tall Pa seemed—tall and gangly like the scarecrow we had out in the vegetable garden. He wasn't really tall at all, hardly even six feet, but he towered over me and my brother. All three of us were bundled in multiple layers of clothing: wool caps, nylon gloves, hand-knitted scarves from Aunt Jeanie, and matching green parkas that Pa had bought on sale from a surplus store in Des Moines. Ice stuck to Pa's eyebrows.

My face hurt, too, but I didn't want to go back. Ma had been screaming and throwing pots all afternoon and it scared me. She just started doing that sometimes and everybody just got out of the way.

"Is it a real dinosaur, Pa?" I asked him.

"It's right up here," he said.

"But is it real?"

"You'll just have to see."

"I want to go back," Chuck said.

When we reached the end of our private road, where it joined up with the single-lane road that we shared with five other farms, I saw what Pa had wanted us to see: a dinosaur made of snow, twice as big as me.

"A T-Rex!" I exclaimed, letting go of his hand and running toward it.

I knew Pa had made it, but it still seemed magical. The details were so precise, right down to the jagged teeth and the flaring nostrils, and the deeper shadows of the low sun accentuated the curves and gave the dinosaur depth. The tail curled around its thick legs and clawed feet. I reached down to touch it.

"Careful," Pa said. "You don't want to break it."

"It's awesome!" I said.

"It's all right," Chuck said. "It's not like it's real or anything."

I looked at him. His red bangs stuck out from the end of his hat and partially covered his eyes. The end of his nose, a long beak nose just like Pa's, was red and blistered. I didn't understand why he had to be so mean. He was always saying mean stuff to Pa.

"Well, I like it," I said adamantly. "The T-Rex is my favorite."

"Mine, too," Pa said. He sounded proud.

"I want to go back," Chuck said.

"Then why don't you?" I shot back.

"Boys," Pa admonished.

"I will if Pa lets me," Chuck said.

Pa grimaced. His eyes, already small and recessed under his brow, squinted and nearly disappeared. "Best to give your Ma time," he said.

"Pa, what does the T-Rex eat?" I asked.

A smile creased Pa's face. "Now that's an interesting question," he said. "You see, most people think a Tyrannosaurus rex was a fearsome predator, and he may have been. He was definitely a carnivore. But there are signs he was more of a scavenger than a hunter. They say he was probably too slow to really track down prey, so he probably waited nearby while other more agile carnivores killed the prey, and then he moved in to take what was left. But he could certainly kill if he had to. One look at his teeth and you could see that." He paused. "Most scientists don't think there were ever many dinosaurs in Iowa, but this one here has an interesting story."

"It does?" I said. It was the most Pa had said at one time in as long as I could remember, and I wanted him to keep talking. I liked the sound of his voice.

"This is stupid," Chuck scoffed.

"Oh, yes," Pa continued, ignoring him. "Every dinosaur has an interesting personal history. This one was originally from the Rockies area, but he was a little small for his kind. It forced him to search far and wide for a mate, which was what brought him here. It's a long way to go for a dinosaur. In the end, he showed he was as strong as the rest, just in his own way."

"I'm going," Chuck said defiantly, and turned back toward the house.

"Son," Pa said.

Chuck kept walking, teetering from side to side as his boots sank into the crusty snow.

"Son," Pa said again. Even then he didn't raise his voice. He never raised his voice, even when Ma was saying the most awful stuff to him. "Son, I mean it now."

Chuck swiveled. "Or what? It's not like you're going to do anything."

"You need to give your Ma time," he said pleadingly.

"Time? How much? Harry died over five years ago, and she's still doing all this crap!"

"Son ... Son, she's doing the best she can."

"She's crazy! She's crazy and you won't stand up to her. Somebody has to stand up to her." Tears streaked his frosted cheeks, leaving tracks in their wake. "Why don't you do something?"

When Pa didn't answer, Chuck stalked away. I watched my Pa's hand rise, reaching for my brother, then drop helplessly to his side. A stiff wind picked up, biting my ears even through the wool cap, and producing a sound I imagined was very much like the roar of a Tyrannosaurus rex.

The storm opened up late that first night after we found the T-Rex track. The lightning and thunder let up after a few hours, but the rain, tapping against the metal roof, continued for two days. I mostly stayed inside except to go out to feed the animals and milk the cows, but I did venture once over to the track. It was still there, though the well-defined edges had melted away. When I brought Ma her meals, I found her sitting in the rocker by her window, her girth spilling out between the cracks in the chair. She had her drawing pad in one hand and a crayon in the other, but she didn't draw anything. She just sat there and stared out the window, the wan, gray light making her look sad and old.

I tried to talk to Harriet, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me. Finally the storm broke that third morning, and by the time I was up, Ma was already clomping through the soggy fields in her boots, the mud spotting her robe. I wondered how long it would take for me to convince her to wash it.

The air was humid and thick with the smell of moist, fecund earth, but it was a welcome change from air so dry it had left my fingertips chapped. The sky was the color of tinsel, the sun invisible. When I was walking back to the house, the morning chores done and my stomach grumbling, I heard a wheezing truck coming up the lane.

I froze. I knew the sound. It was Pa's brother, Ed.

Sure enough, there was his metallic gray F-150 with the black topper jostling up the road. He honked his horn. I walked to our porch, put the horse brush down on the first step, and turned as he skidded to a stop only a few feet from me. Asshole did that all the time, and once even smashed the first post in the railing with his bumper when he showed up drunk and misjudged the distance.

The rattling, clanking engine chugged and died. He spilled out from the truck, a heavy man with face round and flat like a button, and spit onto the blooming yellow roses bordering the deck. Brown tobacco specks blemished the petals. His straw hat with the red bandana band was tilted back on his head, and I saw the white strip at the top of his forehead where the sun seldom reached. He wore his green and blue plaid shirt untucked, probably hoping it would hide his belly, but it was hard to hide when it was the size of beach ball. Dried mud caked the hem of his overalls.

He grinned at me. I say it was a grin, but it was only my interpretation of a grotesque expression that made an ugly face even uglier: he bit down on his lower lip with his buck teeth and lifted the corners of his mouth just a hair. The chew was split into two and bulged from both cheeks equally. It made me think of Rocky J. Squirrel of Rocky and Bullwinkle.

"Jer," he said.

"Hey there, Uncle Ed."

"Your Ma home?"

There was only one thing Edward Dellanger wanted from Ma, the same thing he had wanted from Pa: the deed to our land. I had gathered from bits of conversations over the years that Uncle Ed was still mad as hell that his father had willed the family land to the oldest brother rather than split it equally among all the brothers. There were four brothers in all, but the other two had gone into dentistry and had no interest in the land. Uncle Ed's bitterness on the matter had finally forced Pa to tell him to stay away, and he had until Pa died. It was the only time I could remember Pa actually get mad at anyone.

That their father had given all the brothers enough money to buy their own land hadn't made a whit of difference to Uncle Ed. He owned five hundred acres twenty miles away, but he wouldn't rest until he had our measly hundred and twenty-seven acres too.

"She's out, sir," I said. I prayed she was far enough out in the cornfields that she wouldn't come back before he left.

He squinted at me. "Z'at right?"

"Yep. What can I help you with?"

"You know what it's about, boy. It's about doing the right thing."

I knew he had judged me as dumb as a turnip, so I played the part. "Sorry? I reckon I don't know quite what you mean."

He looked at me for a long time. "Well, that's all right, son. That's all right. It's for us adults to worry about anyway. You just go on tell your Ma that I'm still interested. She'll know what I'm talking about."

"Okay, sir," I said meekly. "I'll do that."

"That's right," he said, flashing me another one of his Rocky J. Squirrel smiles. "You be a good boy and tell her that. Hey, how old are you?"

"Seventeen. Almost eighteen, sir."

"Oh, that's plenty old enough. You wanna hear a joke?"

"Well, I've got my chores—"

"How many Mexicans does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Ten! But the first nine got electrocuted when they tried to put their peckers in the socket!"

He had barely finished the sentence and he was already breaking into guffaws of laughter. He bent over and slapped his knee, wheezing so hard his face turned red. I tried to laugh, but what came out sounded more like a cough. With his head still bent down, he looked up at me. "Get it? They thought to screw meant to screw! 'Cause that's what ... they ... know ... " He squeezed out the last few words before he lost the ability to speak in another fit of laughter.

It was one of those moments when you know exactly what's about to happen—and pretty much how awful it's going to be—and yet you're powerless to stop it.

As he continued to laugh, I saw over his shoulder a bit of white emerging from the stalks. It was one of those moments when you know exactly what's about to happen—and pretty much how awful it's going to be—and yet you're powerless to stop it. Uncle Ed was sobering up, rubbing his eyes and saying "oh, boy, screw, oh boy" over and over, and there came Ma out of the corn, her boots and most of her legs smothered in mud, her robe now looking like a piece of abstract art—brown specks on a white canvas. She took no more than two or three steps before jerking to a halt, looking at Uncle Ed. Her pale face went pink up from the cheeks on down her neck.

"Get off!" she cried.

Uncle Ed jumped as if he had been shot in the back. For just a second, I saw an expression of utter rage on his face before it was quickly replaced with the feigned politeness you get from car salesmen and bible thumpers. He turned, extending his arms as if awaiting a hug.

"Margaret!" he exclaimed. "My, how it's good to see you."

Each of Ma's bulging cheeks looked like ripe tomatoes. "Get off! Get off right now!"

"Now, Margaret—"

"Off!" She charged forward, arms pumping from side to side as if they were powering her body. "You get your filth off my land!"

Because of the angle, I could only see part of Uncle Ed's face, but I was sure I saw fear there. He took a step toward his truck, maybe

to climb inside, but ended up leaning over the front tire as Ma cornered him. Her shaved head was speckled with mud. There was a fly perched on her neck that wasn't moving.

"You!" she cried, pointing a finger in his face. "You know you're not supposed to be here! Gary said you was to keep off and he meant it."

Uncle Ed was leaning so far back I thought he was going to fall onto the hood. "Now, Margaret, all that bad blood is behind us. I'm trying to do something nice—"

"Nice!" Ma shouted, spittle flying out of her mouth onto Uncle Ed's shirt. "You're trying to steal my husband's land. Steal it right out from under him! Dead or no, he wouldn't have it. The poison is in you, in you deep. You bring disease and foulness with you. Look at this weather! It's a harbinger of your filth. Filth!"

She spat the last word in his face. He twitched as if she had poked him with a cattle prod, stood absolutely still for a few seconds, then wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Slowly, he slid away, not looking at Ma once, and eased his way around the side mirror to the driver side door. Ma watched him the way she watched me or the other kids when we'd just been told to go to our rooms.

He opened the door, started to climb inside, then looked at Ma. "I'm only asking for what's rightfully mine, and I'm trying to help you in the pro—"

"FILTH!" Ma shouted. "FILTH AND VILENESS!"

Uncle Ed leaped into his truck and slammed the door. I saw mostly whites in his eyes as he fumbled with the key and finally started the engine. Revving the truck, he looked out over the wheel, and just for a moment I thought he was going to mow Ma down. Then he put the car in gear, looked over his shoulder, and peeled away, his tires spitting mud up onto Ma as high as her waist.

She didn't move. When he had the car spun around, he shouted through his open passenger side window.

"You best sell now while the selling's good! Might not be any takers 'fore too long, the way you're running the place!" He shifted into first, squealed forward a few feet, then stopped again. "And get that pot hole out by your mailbox fixed! Damn thing will kill somebody!"

With that, his truck rattled away. Ma watched him go until he had reached the end our drive, then, muttering to herself, walked past me without so much as a glance. It wasn't more than ten seconds later that the rain started up again—a filthy, vile rain that left me cold to the bone.

When I was sure that Uncle Ed was gone, I walked to the end of our drive. It only took a few seconds for the rain to soak my overalls and my hair, but I didn't care. I had to know. When I saw the pothole right there in the middle of the road, and its unmistakable shape, my heart began to pound.

Three feet long. Two feet wide. Three toes, the one in the middle the largest.

The mud was soft, and it only took a moment to use the side of my boot to make the track disappear.

I didn't tell Ma or Harriet about the second track. Harriet stayed in her room with the door locked, surfacing only for infrequent meals, and wouldn't talk again about Pa. Uncle Ed mailed us a long, typewritten letter two days letter that sent Ma into a screaming rage. Usually, I managed to get to the mail before she did, but there were days when she saw the mail truck while she was out wandering, and if she did, she went straight for the box. She thrust the letter at me while I was milking one of our cows.

"See this!" she cried. "See this! The man won't leave us alone!"

Her robe was partially open, exposing the tops of her breasts. I had stolen the robe away from her room while she slept the previous night, so at least it was somewhat clean again. I wiped my hands on my pants and took the letter from her. The barn smelled of manure and hay, and the inside was dimly lit by the three fluorescent lamps still working. In the next stall, our horse, Ginny, whinnied. I read the letter quickly. It was nothing new. Just Uncle Ed going on and on about how the farm needed to stay with the brothers, that Ma was running it into the ground, and with interest rates low this was the best time to sell. I handed it back to her.

"Your Pa would be so mad if he saw this," Ma said. "He'd give that man a piece of his mind."

I knew Pa would do no such thing, but I nodded. The truth was, I was getting more nervous about October. I didn't know how I would manage to run the combines by myself, let alone do everything else. We had never made a lot of money from our small production, and with one bad harvest we'd lose everything. I knew it. I had been paying the bills and signing Ma's name.

I didn't want to sell to Uncle Ed no matter what, but something had to be done. Between the farm chores, making meals for the family, and keeping up around the house, I was surviving on four hours sleep a night.

"Ma," I said. "We need to get some help if we're going to do harvest."

She shook her head. "Can't have no one else on this farm but family. The future is clear."

I didn't find a Gameboy. But I did find a black book with a soft leather cover on the bottom right shelf, behind a four-volume Time-Life set on dinosaurs.

"But if I don't get help, I can't do it."

"The land will provide."

"It's not the land I'm worried about. It's me."

She smiled. "You're a strong boy. Almost a man. You'll get it done. Your father would be proud."

She turned and walked away, the letter crumpled in her fist. I wanted to strangle her. Later, when Ashley was over helping me with dinner, which she did a couple times a week, she said something that surprised me.

"Maybe you should try to get your brother to help out again," she said.

I paused stirring the sauce, which smelled of mushrooms and garlic, and looked at her to see if she was serious. She was looking down into the pot of boiling noodles, and the steam enveloped her face. She wore a Pearl Jam T-shirt and cut-off jeans, her hair pulled back into a pony tail and tied with a rubber band.

"I thought you said—" I began.

"I know," she said. "But you need help and he's your best bet. Lay the guilt trip on him. It's not fair that he can be in college while you work your tail off here."

"He won't answer the phone."

"Then drive out there."

"Huh? I can't leave Ma and—"

"It'll only take you a couple of hours. You can go tomorrow afternoon. I'll get off early from the store and watch the place for you."

I knew her real reason for me to get Chuck was to try to free me up to go to California, but I didn't say so. I didn't see how that was going to happen. Even with my brother's help, it would still take two of us to run the farm. I also knew that if she really wanted me to join her, she would have just let the farm go under, which meant she was putting my need to save the place above her own interests.

I kissed her on the cheek, a cheek moist from the steam, and she looked at me in surprise.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"For being the best girlfriend a guy can have," I replied.

So the next day, with the skies again clear and blue, I took to the road in Pa's old '79 Thunderbird. It was white with a black top, a

top he had replaced after a nasty hail storm back in the eighties. Flat and rectangular, the car looked like a rather thick playing card, but it drove well. I worked my way north along the smaller web of highways, hit I-80, and then two hours later rolled into Iowa City. The University of Iowa was downtown, and I parked at a pay meter in front of the Iowa Memorial Union, which looked out over the Iowa River. There were plenty of students walking about, which surprised me, because it was summer.

The whole thing was crazy. I didn't even have an address. But I found a student directory, and as luck would have it, Charles L. Dellanger was in there, and even luckier, he was living in Stanley Residence Hall on campus. I walked the short distance to the hall and walked inside as someone was leaving. Just like that, I was standing in front of his second floor room.

He flung the door open on the third knock, shirtless and wearing orange Bermuda shorts. A silver peace symbol on a leather strap hung around his neck. He was taller and skinner than me, plus his once red hair had been bleached blond. He had let it grow to his shoulders in the nine months since I had seen him last. He was also paler than I remembered. No more farmer tan.

"Holy shit," he said.

I smelled marijuana smoke wafting out of his room. The only reason I knew the smell was that Ashley and I had tried it once—tried it and hated it. Behind him I saw that his computer was on, and that there were sticky notes all over the monitor. The shades were closed, only a lamp clipped to his headboard lighting the room. On the rumpled bed on the other side of the room were stacks of comic books. Green Lantern, by the looks of them. He had been collecting them forever.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"What do you want?"

Chuck was always one to get right to the point. I swallowed, realizing this was most likely not going to go well.

"I just want to talk," I said.

"'Bout what?"

"Just stuff. Can I come in?"

"Well, I was kinda busy."

"Bagging comics and smoking pot?" I said sarcastically. I wondered if his scholarship would be revoked if they knew he was buying weed with the money.

He looked at me, squinting as if there was something on the end of my nose. "I'm taking a break. So sue me. But I got a lot of studying to do."

"Chuck, I came a long way."

"I go by Charlie now."

"Fine, Charlie—"

"My girlfriend likes it better. Says it sounds sexier. Like Charlie Sheen."

"That's great. Think I can have just a few minutes of your time?"

He sighed and walked away from the door, which I realized was the only invitation I was going to get. I followed, closing the door behind me. You could actually see the mist in the air. He launched himself into in his narrow bed, one bare foot draped over the side, and proceeded to leaf through one of his comics. Posters of Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Green Lantern covered the walls. A microwave sat on the small refrigerator in the corner, an empty popcorn bag on the floor next to it.

I look a seat in the swivel chair in front of the computer. "Look, I'll get right to the point," I said. "I need you to come home and help with the farm."

He turned a page. "Uh huh."

"I can't do it by myself. We need you."

"What about the hired hands?

"Ma fired them."

He snorted. "Figures."

"I can't reason with her."

"Big surprise."

"That's why we need you. Harriet needs you. Ma needs you."

His jaw tensed. He flipped a few more pages in silence, then picked up a clear plastic bag from a box on the floor and slipped the comic inside. Finally, he looked at me. There was rage in his eyes for a moment, then it slipped away and he looked sad.

"You came all the way out here to beg for my help?" he asked.

"I don't know what other choice I have."

"Sure you do. You can leave just like I did."

I shook my head. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

I felt my own rage and resentment bubbling to the surface. "Because I actually care what happens to Ma and Harriet."

"Ah, they'll be fine. Listen, you can't let her drag you down, man. You've got to get out of there. I got out and I ain't ever going back no matter what. When the farm goes under, she'll be forced to come to grips with reality. Until then it's crazy day every day on the Dellanger farm. Trust me. You leave and you'll be doing her a favor."

I sat there and stewed in my anger. I hated the casual way he talked about our family's problems. I hated how he called me "man" as if he was some kind of New Age hippie. I hated that he didn't have the foggiest notion of what it meant to actually be responsible.

I realized that nothing I said would change his mind about coming back, and that my being there was a mistake.

"Okay," I said, rising, "thanks, then. I best be getting back."

"Back to shoveling cow shit, huh? What a life."

He laughed. He didn't even get up to let me out, just sat there smirking at me with his fingers clasped over his chest. When I was at the door, he spoke again.

"Hey, man," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Look, no hard feelings, you know? I mean, you're my brother, but we've all got to do what's in our best interest. If Pa had done that, he'd still be alive today. Seriously. He should of put Ma in a home. Sold the farm and done something he really wanted to do. A million things. But he did nothing. He just let life happen to him because he was too scared to make something happen on his own, and then all of Ma's crazy shit just wore him down and killed him. Don't be like that, Jerry."

I wished he was standing so I could punch him the face. Instead, I turned and walked out.

When I was ten, I wanted a Gameboy real bad. It was November, nearly Thanksgiving, and Pa was out working the combine. It was late for harvest, but that happened sometimes. Ma was out doing grocery shopping with little Harriet. Chuck was at school. I was supposed to be in bed with the flu. I was sneaking around in the basement, looking for Christmas presents, when I found Pa's Dinosaur Diaries.

The dusty steps creaked under my bare feet. My thin cotton pajamas did little in fending off the cool air. My nose was plugged, my forehead warm, and I had been on and off the toilet most of the morning. I searched by the weak daylight slanting in from the high windows, afraid that if I turned on the overhead lights Pa would see them and know I was down here. The two freezers hummed. I searched the workbench area first, didn't find anything, then moved to Pa's reading corner. It was a nook created by three pine bookshelves, and they were packed with all his dinosaur books—hundreds of them, some shiny new, some with old library stickers on them. A metal desk sat in the center, a reading lamp with a movable arm clipped to one of the shelves.

The corner was too far away from the windows to see much, so I risked turning on the lamp. Pa had expressly forbid us from being around his desk without him, so my heart was pounding hard. I searched the drawers, didn't find anything, and then on a whim decided to search behind the books.

I didn't find a Gameboy. But I did find a black book with a soft leather cover on the bottom right shelf, behind a four-volume Time Life set on dinosaurs. Curious, I pulled out the book. The leather was lightly pebbled. I thought it was a bible at first, but when I opened

it, I saw lined pages filled with Pa's tiny, compact handwriting:

Third sun after full moon—Hunted brontosaurus today. Mate stayed to guard eggs. She will not leave the eggs. It rained hard and long.

Eight sun after full moon—More rain. Colder, and the sore from the fight with the Stegosaurus will not heal. Fed on a half-eaten Allosaurus carcass. The meat was rotting. It was not a good day, but I am strong and will survive.

The book went on for page after page like that until a third a way to the end, where the pages were blank. I was only brave enough to look at it for a few minutes before putting it back where I found it, and I was afraid for weeks that Pa would know I had touched it. He never said anything about it, though now and then he looked at me in a strange way that made me think he knew.

I never found the presents, but I did get a Gameboy that Christmas.

Ashley cried when I told her what happened with Chuck. The way she carried on, you'd think I'd died or something.

Three days later, another track appeared, this one behind the barn. Ma found it first and went into hysterics, then spent the next day and a half locked in her room. Two days after that, we found another, this one by the house, and after that they showed up every day or so. Always the same T-Rex track. Always just one. I stopped trying to cover them up. I also stopped trying to convince myself it was just somebody's prank.

They were starting to make me afraid.

The other thing that showed up more often were Uncle Ed's letters, each one more desperate-sounding than the last. I didn't get to read all of them—Ma tore up plenty of them unopened—but the ones I did were comical in their reasoning. We should sell him the land because it was right. We should sell him the land because we were Americans and Americans would help each other out. We had to think of his family, especially his two sons (he didn't mention his daughter). They deserved it as their inheritance. Also included were pictures cut out from travel magazines, of tropical locales around the world. Hawaii. Tahiti. Puerto Vallarta. Scrawled on these pictures in black marker were comments like "Great this time of year!" or "I think you'd enjoy visiting this one!" The image of Uncle Ed sitting at his kitchen table and using a pair of scissors to neatly cut out the pictures made me laugh. Then it made me mad.

His price kept going up until it was nearly double what he first offered, far over market value. It was a lot money. Enough to put Ma in some type of home. Enough to put Harriet in a boarding school. Enough to at least give me a running start at college. But I never seriously considered encouraging Ma to sell it to him. That's when I realized that maybe I didn't really want to sell it, that it wouldn't matter if it was Uncle Ed or somebody else, and even though I sensed it was true, it was tough to swallow.

I hated farming. I hated every minute of it. I had always hated it, probably hated it as much as my brother hated it, and I could never see that changing.

I was also afraid of doing anything else.

Two weeks after returning from seeing Chuck, I drove over to see Ashley. We were closing in on August, and the date of her departure was ten days away. I wasn't looking forward to what I had to do. I could have waited until the last minute, but that wouldn't have been fair. She deserved to have her mind clear of Iowa cobwebs when she arrived in California.

"You don't have to do this," she pleaded.

The sun was low in the sky but not yet down. She lived in a double-wide trailer behind their store, a store which sat on the edge of one of the many two-lane highways that crisscrossed Iowa. We sat in the T-Bird in their gravel driveway, a giant oak shielding us from the sun. We were facing the trailer, and I saw the flicker of the television through the closed kitchen blinds. Behind us, an eighteen wheeler rumbled past, stirring up waves of dust.

"I think I do," I said. I was trying my best to keep from choking up. Later. Just not now. If I did, she'd break down and then it would be much worse.

She squeezed my hand. Her fingers were small and cold, not all like her fingers usually were. "We could write. I could come visit during the holidays. In a couple of years—"

"No," I said.

"But why?"

"Because you don't need to be thinking about me way out here in Iowa when you've got all those things to do in California. It's not right."

"But I love you."

I had to keep looking through the mud-streaked windshield at her trailer. If I looked at her, I would lose all ability to speak.

"I love you, too," I said. "Always will, Ash. But my place is here. Yours is there. And nothing's going to change that."

She started crying then, leaning into my shoulder, and I put my arm around her. In some ways I was glad because I didn't think I'd be able to keep up my brave face much longer. I had told her I loved her, but I said it in the matter-of-fact way you'd tell your favorite aunt you loved her. It didn't sum up at all how I really felt. She had been with me for years, staying by me when she had every reason to leave. I had imagined putting a ring on her finger lots of times. She meant everything to me. I would be completely lost without her.

And I knew if I told her that, she'd never go.

After Pa's funeral, when all the relatives were talking in low voices in the living room, I stole away into the basement and looked behind the Time Life set for Pa's Dinosaur Diary. There was nothing there. I searched everywhere—behind all the books, in the desk, even in the workshop area—but it wasn't to be found. When I was about to give up, I saw a crumpled sheet of paper with my father's handwriting on it in the tin garbage can. I pulled it out, smoothing the paper on the desk. It was about a third-filled with the same strange diary entries:

Seventh sun after full moon—Food is scarce. Mate is not well. It is hard to both hunt and look after the hatchlings. But I am strong. I am strong enough for all of us.

Twelfth sun after full moo —There is a great storm brewing on the horizon. I sense its approach. I sense it may be the end of me. I want to run. I want to

The entry stopped like that, in mid-sentence. But there were a couple more lines below, in bold, blocky lettering:

I AM A TYRONOSAURUS REX, THE STRONGEST OF ALL THE DINOSAURS. I AM BRAVE. I AM POWERFUL. AND THERE IS NOTHING LIFE CAN DO TO ME THAT I CANNOT ENDURE.

When I read the final line, I buried my head in my arms and cried. I cried for the man I knew, and for the man I knew he wished to be. I cried because he had torn out the page from his diary and thrown it away, and I had no idea why.

I had seen his placid face in a walnut casket, I had put my arm around my crying mother, I had watched his coffin being lowered into the ground, but that was the first time I truly realized he was gone.

"Jerry?"

I was so astonished to hear my sister's voice in the barn that I dropped the horse brush in the hay. Our dun snorted and fidgeted. Harriet leaned over the gate, a skeleton in t-shirt and jeans, the baseball cap on her head turned backwards. The circles under her eyes were so big they looked like the face paint football players wore to deflect the sun. She had hardly said a word to me since that night she told me about playing chess with Pa, and she certainly hadn't been out of the house.

"Hey," I said. "Something a matter?"

"No, not really. I just need to tell you something. I should have told you before. I just ... I didn't feel like it."

I walked over to her. "What is it?"

She swallowed. "Well, it's Pa. It's ... It happened before I talked to you. We were playing, and I don't know why I said it, but I told him I was mad at him. I told him I was mad at him for leaving us."

"You did?"

She nodded. Her eyes were tearing up. "I shouldn't have done it. He said he was sorry, and that he loved me, but he couldn't change it. He said he wished he could have been stronger for us. I didn't say anything, and then he didn't show up again. He hasn't showed up since. Jesus, Jerry. He must think I hate him. I just ... I just thought you should know."

She turned and walked back toward the house.

A few days after Ashley left for California, I woke in the middle of the night. I thought I heard something—a distant crackling, like fireworks over the hill. Moonlight streamed in from the window, so bright I could see the posters on my walls. The sheets were a tangled, sweaty mass wrapped around my legs. The curtains billowed in the breeze coming from the open window. I didn't hear anything, and then I realized how strange that was. The crickets were silent.

I was beginning to think I had dreamed the sound when it came again, far out in the fields, and this time it sent my pulse racing. I knew what it was. It was the sound of something crunching the cornstalks.

It came a third time. Then a fourth. Closer.

I slipped from bed, naked except for my boxers, and walked barefoot to the window. I looked out at the silvery fields, able to see all the way to the horizon. The crunch came again. This time I actually saw a gap appear in the stalks not too far out. There was nothing there to produce the gap, but it still had appeared.

I also saw something else. Ma stood at the edge of our drive, right where the fields began, her white robe glowing as if it had been painted with the moonlight. She stood still and silent, looking up at where I imagined the head of the T-Rex would be. Another crunch, another gap. Then the gaps were right by Ma, and still she didn't move.

She stood like that for a long time, then turned back toward the house. The sounds didn't come again.

The storm clouds blew in the next day, thick and ominous. The tracks were everywhere now, and there was no denying something was happening. I just wished I knew what it was.

Ma gathered up me and Harriet after dinner and told us she had something to say. We sat on the moss green couch in the family room and she paced back and forth in front of us. She clutched a stack of her drawings in each hand, and she waved them at us when she was talking. She said a whole bunch of stuff that made no sense to me, stuff about the planets and the signs all being right, and then she laid the bombshell on us.

"I talked to your father," she said, and for a moment she seemed absolutely lucid. "I talked to him last night and he told me it's time for you to leave. You need to leave to be safe. So I want you to pack your bags and take the car."

"Ma!" I exclaimed.

"I'm not leaving you," Harriet said.

"Don't argue with me, little girl," Ma said. "It must be done." She patted both our cheeks. "I'm sorry I couldn't be a better mama for you both. I wanted to, you know. I wanted everything to be so perfect. I thought it could be perfect, if you wanted it bad enough. And then your brother Harry died ..." She trailed off, and her eyes took on a far-off look.

"Ma," I said, "we're not leaving. You need us here."

Her face darkened. The sane woman who had made a brief appearance was again gone, and she screamed at us. "You need to listen to your mother!"

When neither of us offered a reply, she tossed her stack of drawings into the air and stormed out of the room.

"I can't be responsible! You should go tonight!"

Her drawings wafted down to the floor like snowflakes. I expected more crazy swirls of color, but when I saw what she had drawn, I froze.

Every single one was a Tyrannosaurus rex.

They came the same night Ma told us to leave.

I lay in bed, listening to the distant rumble of thunder. The temperature had dropped, but it hadn't rained yet. The cool wind rustled my curtains, made goose bumps break out on my arms. I was thinking about getting up and closing the window when I heard a car or truck rumbling up our drive.

My breath lodged in my throat. I went to the window, and saw the gray van screech to a halt just inches from our porch. The license plate was obscured with mud. When I saw the two men in the front seats with pillowcases over their heads, big, jagged ovals cut out for the eyes, I froze. The clouds had smothered any moonlight or starlight, so the farm beyond the reach of our porch lights was a shapeless void.

They piled out of the van, a half dozen men. The pillowcases were various colors, everything from white to navy blue. It wasn't until I saw a flicker that I realized they were carrying torches. Soon all the torches were ablaze. Only one of them didn't have a torch, and the others watched silently as this man approached our house.

The creak of his foot on our porch finally snapped me back to my senses. My heart pounding, I rushed to Harriet's room and was about to bang on the door when it opened. She was dressed in shorts and a yellow tank-top, and by the alarmed look on her face I knew she had already seen what was outside.

"Come on," I said, running for Ma's room.

There were footsteps on the stairs. I heard thunder, and it was closer. I reached Ma's room, tried the knob, and found it locked. She never locked the door. I banged on it hard.

"Ma! We have to get out of here!"

Now there was another sound ... it was the same sound from the night I saw Ma standing at the edge of the field, the sound of something heavy crunching down on the cornstalks.

The door didn't open.

"Ma!"

"Come on!" Harriet shouted behind me.

A small voice from within came back: "You kids go on. You're better off without me now."

"No!" I protested. "Ma, we're not leaving without you. You have to come."

Harriet screamed. I turned to see the man rounding the corner, his eyes bright white inside his dark pillowcase. By his size and shape, he could have been Uncle Ed, and I figured he was. I wished a lot of things in that moment. I wished I had bothered to move Pa's rifle up from the basement. I wished I had actually learned how to shoot a rifle. I wished I had worked harder to convince Ma to leave.

Hollering, I threw myself at the man and landed both my fists in his belly. He groaned and staggered back, but he didn't go down. He smelled like sweat and tobacco. I threw myself at him again and he grabbed my wrists and threw me against the wall. Harriet shrieked and launched herself at him, and he grabbed her and tossed her

over his shoulder. With her pummeling his back, he turned and started back down the hall. I was on the carpet wheezing, and I grabbed at his ankle.

He kicked my hand away. "You best come with me if you know what's good for you," he said. He had dropped his voice, but I could still tell it was Uncle Ed.

"You bastard!" I said.

By the time I managed to stand, he was halfway down the stairs, Harriet screaming the whole way. I started after him, then thought about Ma still in her room, and stood there paralyzed.

"Come on, Ma! We have to go!"

I heard the downstairs door banging open. My sister cursed. I heard a slap, and then she was silent.

Not wanting to leave Ma, but not wanting to leave with my sister with my asshole uncle, I stumbled down the stairs after him.

"Now!" I heard a man shout outside.

When I staggered onto the porch, I saw the men flinging their torches onto the house. I smelled gasoline. The man I assumed was Uncle Ed still had Harriet over his shoulder, but she was limp. I covered my head with my arms and leapt off the porch as the roof exploded in flames. At the same time, another peal of thunder rolled out over the farm.

I landed hard in the dirt. One of them men grabbed me and pinned me in his arms. I struggled, but he was much bigger than me, and I couldn't break his grip. The flames roared across the roof. All I could think about was Ma still inside.

"No!" I cried. "Ma! Ma!"

It started to drizzle. I wish I could say that the drizzle became a downpour, strong enough to put out the fire, but that's not what happened. That house was already so hot it was certain to burn to the ground, and there was little anyone could do to stop it. After tiring of struggling against my captor, I stood numbly and watched.

Then I heard another noise, a boom that was right upon us. I thought it was thunder at first, but it was too close and too loud. It came again, longer and deeper, and my captor loosened his grip. The sound was coming from the fields behind us.

It wasn't thunder. It was a roar.

All the men turned toward the fields and back-stepped toward the house. I wiped the water out of my eyes. I could only see the first few cornstalks, like bars in a gate. Everything beyond was murky darkness. Now there was another sound, and I recognized it immediately: it was the same sound from the night I saw Ma standing at the edge of the field, the sound of something heavy crunching down on the cornstalks. The men were now moving toward their van, none of them looking away from the approaching footsteps.

I saw Harriet had been left on the ground, unconscious, and I went to her and lifted her upright. She was as light as a broom.

"Wake up," I told her.

"Hmmh?" she said. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Come on, come on!"

The cornstalks next to us suddenly smashed to the ground, first one area, then another ten feet away. Harriet's eyes popped open. She jumped toward me, and I lost my balance and landed hard on my backside, her on top of me. Tracks—tracks I had gotten so used to seeing the past weeks—had appeared in the dirt. We looked up into the fine mist of rain. I saw nothing at first, but then the wind shifted, blowing smoke from the house right over us, and for a moment I saw the shape of the T-Rex's monstrous jaws in the shifting vapors.

The men must have seen it, too, because they ran for the van. Another track appeared, this one right next to us, and I felt the earth shake. The T-Rex roared, making my ears ring. I grabbed Harriet's head and pulled her down flat to the ground. Another track appeared up ahead, and then I felt the rush of air that must have been its tail passing over us. The tracks continued halfway to the house, then stopped.

The van squealed in reverse, doing a half circle, the tires already spinning the other direction. I heard the T-Rex's booming steps, and this time they were moving toward the van. Again the thing passed through the smoke, and this time I saw its entire body. The huge, teeth-lined mouth. The puny arms. The massive, muscular legs. The legs appeared to move languidly, but because of the creature's size, it moved forward as fast as a galloping horse.

The dinosaur roared again.

The van was picking up speed, racing beyond the reach of our porch lights. The tracks appeared like bomb craters, each one coming faster. Another few seconds and the van would have gotten beyond the T-Rex's reach, but then there was a metallic boom and the van slid to the side like a croquet ball being struck by a mallet. The van rolled a dozen times before coming to a rest in the field, then burst into flames.

The house, totally consumed by the fire, was collapsing. The entire second floor was gone. I looked up and to my amazement saw Ma, her face and robe coated in soot, standing where her room would be. I ran toward the house, but couldn't get within three steps because the fierce heat pushed me back.

"Ma!"

The booms came again, the tracks now coming toward us, and my sister rushed into my arms. I thought that was it, the dinosaur was coming for us too, but the tracks veered at the last second toward the house. One footprint smashed through the porch, then another. The head appeared, wreathed in flames, stretching toward my mother. I was sure it was going to snap her up in its jaws, but instead it poised in front of her, and she climbed up onto its head.

Then she was lifted up and out of the fire. The thunderous steps came again, and the tracks moved off toward the cornfields. I watched as the dinosaur disappeared as it left the smoke, and then it seemed as if my mother rode an invisible magic carpet into the darkness. Soon the sounds of its footsteps receded, and with a final, distant roar, they were gone.

If you read the police report about what happened that night on the Dellanger farm, you'll see that it says that Ma burned up in the flames. No one ever found a body, but they claim that the gasoline-induced inferno consumed every last bit of her. My sister and I never contradicted them.

They also had a hard time piecing together exactly what caused the van to crash. Driver error is what it says in the report, although it seems hard to explain how driver error could cause the massive dent in the side of the van. But nobody seemed to want to work very hard to investigate, especially after it was obvious the men had deserved their deaths.

The fierce rainstorm that opened up that night also washed away a lot of things that might have raised questions, but there were still the unusual crushed areas in the cornfields. Nobody knew what to make of those. I told them I was learning how to make crop circles. That got them to laugh, and they never brought it up again. They seemed relieved to believe something.

I put the land on the market at a bargain basement price, and it only took a month to find a buyer—a farmer nearby who needed more food for his livestock. I also turned eighteen in the meantime, and the judge awarded me custody of Harriet. We are staying in a motel until the deal closes in a few days, a motel right off I-80, surrounded by oaks turning red and crimson.

The summer is gone. Fall is upon us. When the papers are signed, we'll hop in the T-Bird, everything we own packed into the back seat and trunk, and drive west until we reach the ocean. California is beckoning.

Even if things work out with Ashley, I have no illusions life will be easy. For some people, life is just hard. But whatever challenges lie ahead, I no longer fear them.

My father was a Tyrannosaurus rex, and he was strong in his own way. But I am only a man.

Yet I am brave.

And I am powerful.

And there is nothing life can do to me that I cannot endure. ❧

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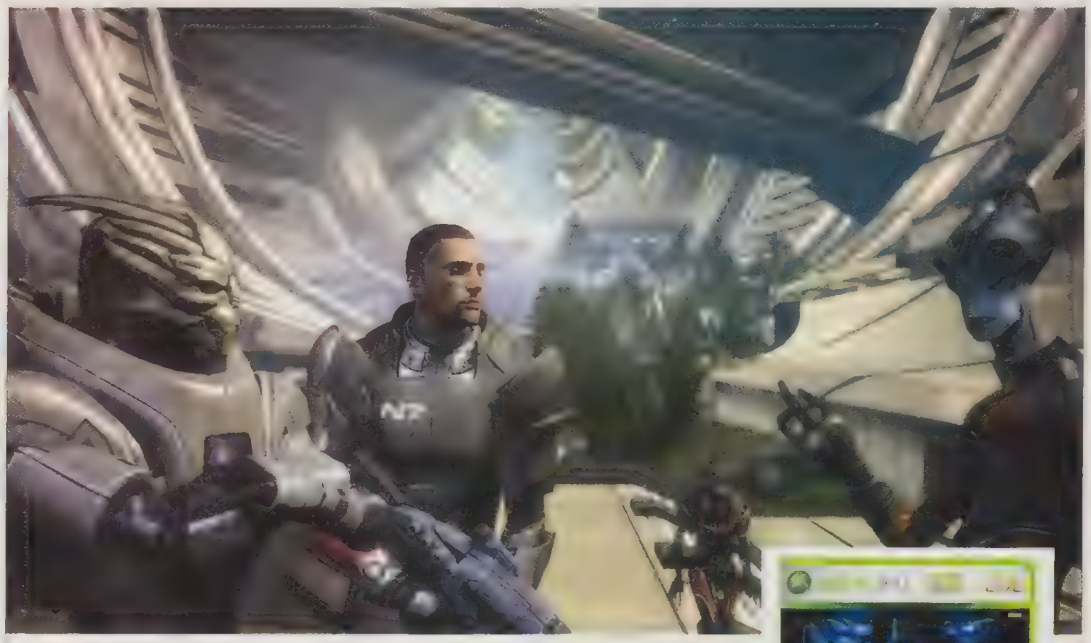
By Eric T. Baker

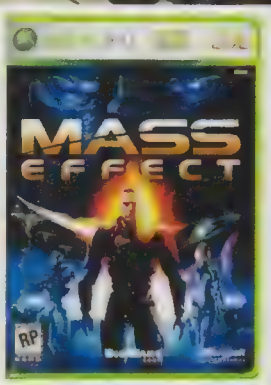
You will love fighting and exploring and talking your way through *Mass Effect.*

It has been four years since they released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic,* the epic computer RPG set in the *Star Wars* universe. Considering that *Jade Empire* is one of the top ten RPGs of all time and that *SWKotOR* is one of the top five games ever made, period, the anticipation has been very high for BioWare's latest game: ***Mass Effect*** for the Xbox 360, an action RPG set in a science fiction universe of the creators' own devising.

In the future, humanity discovers bits of high technology left behind on Mars by the vanished Proteans. This alien technology allows us to expand beyond our star system and encounter the Alliance, a loose federation of alien races whose governmental seat is on the Citadel, a gigantic space station constructed by the Proteans. The player takes the role of Commander Shepard, a human naval officer whose background, face, gender, and class are all customizable at the game's start.

The Alliance has a group of extra-legal agents called Specters. One of them goes rogue at the game's start. Shepard is inducted into the Specters, given a ship, finds a crew, and sets out to track the rogue down. This is the basic format of the game, with the player using the ship to travel around the galaxy and at each stop fighting and talking his way through encounters. When off the ship, Shepard takes two of his six crew members with him. Having a crew of three lets the player spread expertise in skills and powers across the party as everyone levels instead of being forced to make one character good at everything.





Players assume the role of Commander Shepard, a member of the Specters, who takes a crew to track down a rogue agent in BioWare's Mass Effect. *As he travels the galaxy he meets up with various members of the Alliance, a federation of alien races.*

In lots of ways, *ME* is a pretty straightforward computer RPG, but several things make it stand out. For one, it is a beautiful game. Not just the cutscenes, but the backgrounds, levels, character models, and the water and light effects all look great. And when the camera zooms in for the dialogue trees, the animation of the faces and bodies, the blinking of the eyes, the gestures, and the expressions are all both detailed and natural. The CGI characters in *ME* display as much depth and emotion as has ever been portrayed in a video game. All the stories contained in the game, from the tragedy of an orphan girl rescued from alien

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slavers to the fumbles of new romance are equally affecting.

Another way *ME* differs from other RPGs is in the depth of the dialogue trees. RPGs tell story through cutscene and dialog tree, the NPCs presenting story and the player choosing what he wants to hear. *ME* not only does this in full animation and full voice acting, but players get to choose not only what Shepard responds with but how. The choices aren't so broad that these exchanges can be confused with real dialogue, but they are far more fun to work through than the text-only, very linear trees that are more common in RPGs. Also, unlike traditional trees, the player in *ME* sees the next possible choices while the nonplayer character is still speaking, which lets the dialogue flow more quickly and smoothly than in other games.

The combat in *ME* is an over-the-shoulder, zoomable to first person affair that contains running and gunning similar to the true first-person fights in *Halo*. The difference is that at any time the player can pause the game to assign the members of the player's three-person squad their guns and then also pick the targets of their special biotic powers. Particularly if the player takes a fighter character at the start, it is possible to just let the AI guide the other two squad mates while the player runs and guns, but it is wasting a lot of great game play and making the fights much harder than they need to be if the player doesn't use the game's tools to maximize the diversity of the party's talents and the control the game gives the player over them.

The flaws in *ME* are few, but they are there. There is a certain repetition in the settings and maps used in the planetary side quests. The elevators are used as loading screens when the characters change levels, which results in them seeming needlessly slow. For such a deep and diverse game, the tutorial is very short and very light. The various character classes play differently, but the cost of that is that they aren't balanced. An engineer is much harder to play out of the box than a soldier. On the other hand, there are so many good things in *ME*, including the ability to save at any time the characters aren't in combat, that the few rough spots are easily overlooked. *Mass Effect* may not be the game that gets nongamers to play, but if you're interested enough in games to be reading this column, you will love fighting and exploring and talking your way through the galaxy of *ME*.

The next game keeps the player in charge of a ship, but this time it is a sailing one. ***Pirates of the Burning Sea*** is a massive multiplayer online RPG set in AD 1720 in the Caribbean. The players take the role of a ship captain from one of the nations who were hotly contesting that sea at the time: Britain, France, and Spain. The players can also choose "Pirate" as their nation. Within their nation, the characters can be naval officers, merchants, privateers, and of course the Pirates can choose pirate as their profession.

The game is played both on and off ship. Players start by creating a male or female avatar and then they are given a starter ship and dropped into the tutorial. The end of the tutorial mission gives the character a map that will be a MacGuffin throughout the player's climb to the level cap. From that point they arrive at the starter port and begin doing missions to earn the money and skills they will need to get bigger and better ships. Players can't sail a ship above their level, but all the ships below them are fair game.

The quest system is in the form that has become standard in MMOs. Find the characters in a port with the glowies over their head. Do (or do not do) the quest they offer. If done, return for the reward and a pointer to the next quest. Most of the missions happen in instanced zones, so there is no waiting for a particular NPC to spawn or having needed kills farmed out by other players. The missions are divided more or less evenly between those players do with their avatars and those they do aboard ship.

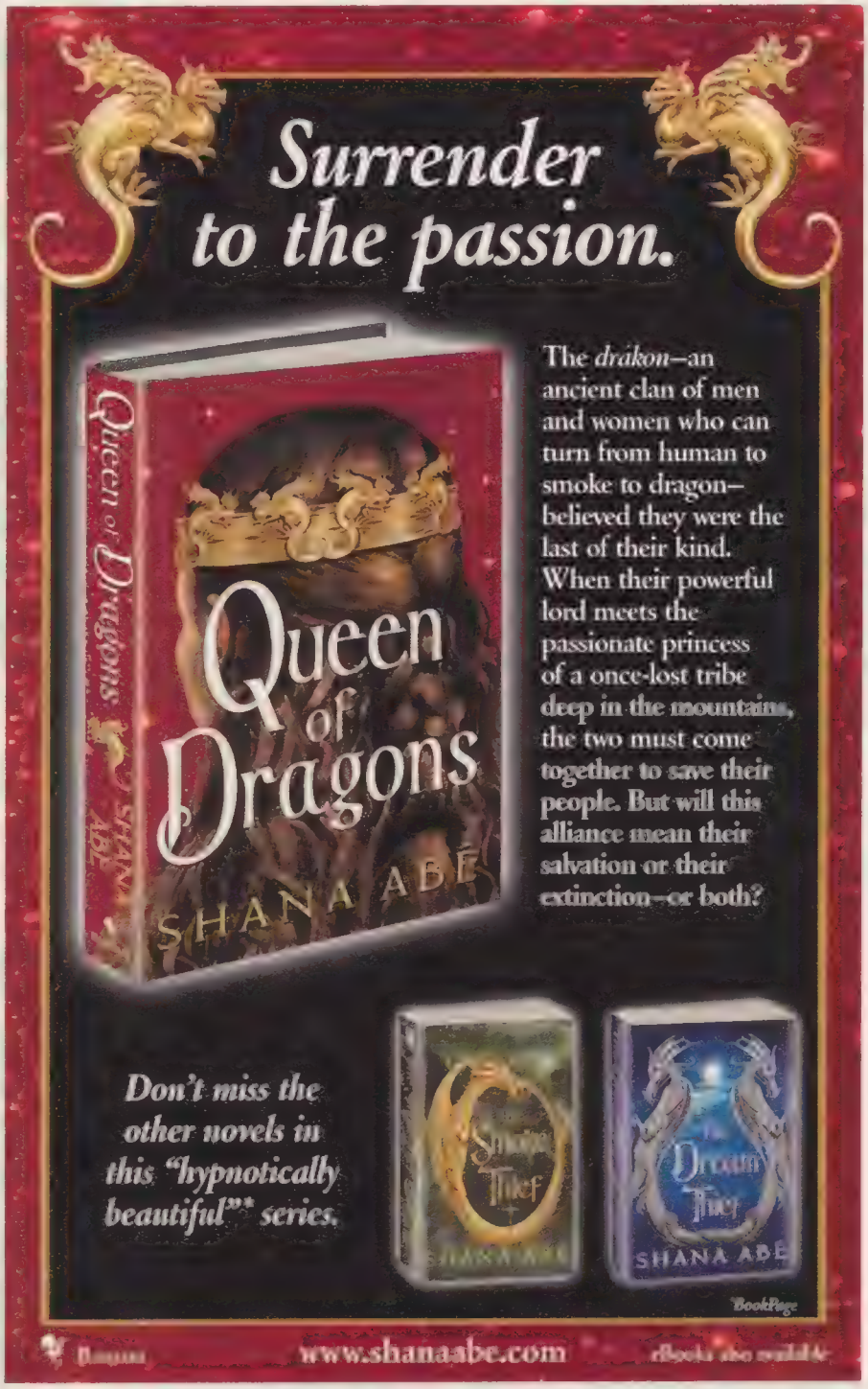
Avatar combat is like regular combat in most MMOs. The player targets an enemy and then launches moves and powers at it until it is dead. Ship combat is more complex because the game tries to model actual fighting sail engagements. Of course, real fighting sail battles took hours, so there is some speed and arcadeness added to the combat, but there is a wind gauge, and each ship handles differently in how it best likes to run with the wind. The ships take damage separately in each of their four directions, and the cannons have firing arcs. When ships get alongside one another, they can be boarded, at which point avatar combat breaks out. This can be a relief because ship combat is like nothing in any other MMO, and unlike anything in most other games. Simply not being able to back up eliminates the tactic of "pulling" (attacking just one enemy on the edge of a group and then backing up so it will chase the player but

the others won't) that is most commonly used to kill computer enemies in these games.

Besides ship combat, the other big difference between *PotBS* and most MMOs is that the economy is entirely player based. There are a few standard ships and parts at the beginning, but as the characters climb in level, they have to start either crafting their own ships and equipment or buy them from players who have done so. This crafting economy drives the travel from port to port that leads to the PVP that is another integrated part of the game. The PVP zones are dynamic, but clearly marked. Players can avoid them if they wish, but doing so limits what they can buy, sell, and quest.

It has been a very long development cycle for *PotBS* and it launches as one of the most polished MMOs ever. At the same time, it is an MMO aimed at players who are fans of fighting sail, PVP, and historical recreation. While nearly anyone can jump in and have fun leveling a pirate for a while, the players who subscribed for the chance at swashbuckling derring do are not going to stick around nearly as long as those who signed on for the thrill of raking broadsides.

Despite these two lengthy takes, not all games worth playing this season are RPGs. ***Portal*** from Valve Corporation comes in the Orange Box Bundle for the PC, 360, and PS3, or it can be purchased separately over Valve's Steam store. However you get hold of it, you'll find it one of your most rewarding purchases in months. *Portal* is basically a first-person puzzle game, but it is executed with such precision and with such black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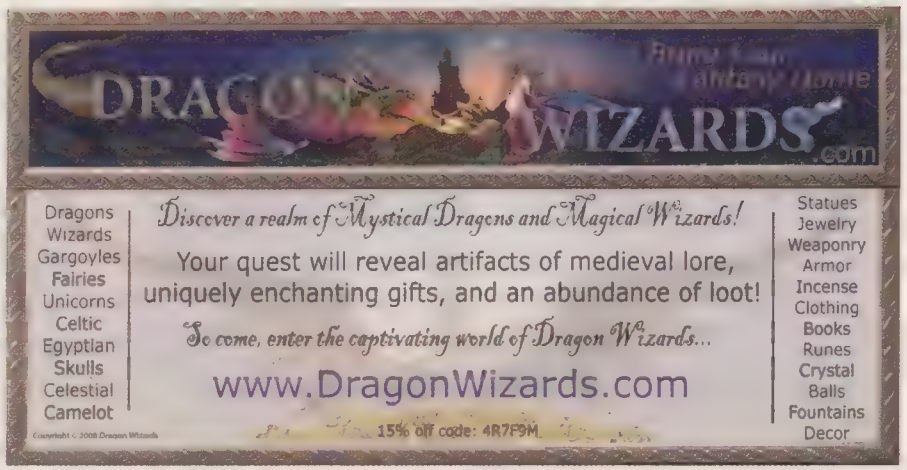


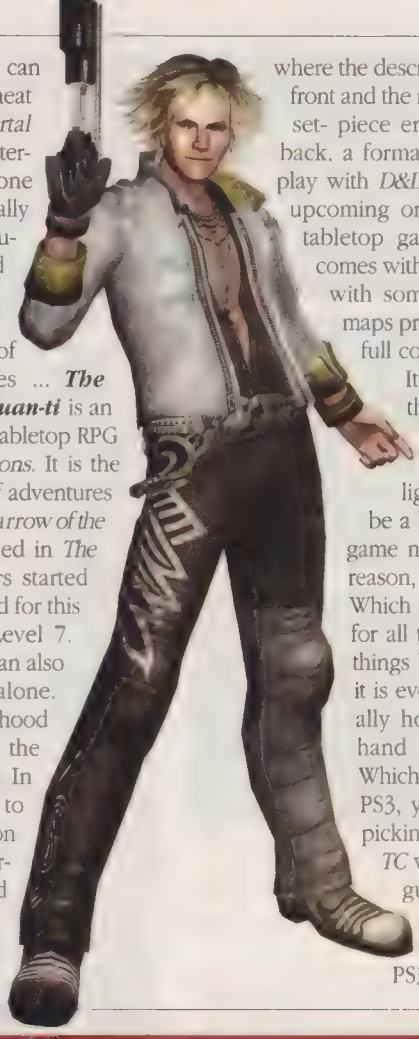
humor that the player is kept laughing as well as challenged for the full four to five hours it takes to complete it.

Despite its first-person view, there is no real twitch element to *Portal*. In the last few levels there are some timed puzzles that can be extra challenging, but if worse comes to worse, the player can always resort to cheat codes. Overall, *Portal* is a surprisingly entertaining game, one that you can actually finish in only a couple of days and walk away completely satisfied.

And speaking of shorter adventures ... ***The Fortress of the Yuan-ti*** is an adventure for the tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is the third in a trilogy of adventures that started with *Barrow of the Forgotten King* and continued in *The Sinister Spire*. Characters started the first one at Level 2 and for this game they are up to Level 7, although the adventure can also be played as a stand-alone.

Basically, an evil brotherhood has gotten its hands on the bones of a long-dead king. In those bones is the power to wreak tremendous harm upon the world. It is up to the characters to enter the fortress and get the bones back.

This adventure uses *D&D*'s Tactical Encounters format where the description of events is up front and the maps and stats for the set- piece encounters are in the back, a format that lends itself to play with *D&D* miniatures and the upcoming online version of the tabletop game. The adventure comes with its own DM's screen with some of the encounter maps printed on the inside in full color.



It would seem obvious that with all the shooting that goes on in video games that light gun games would be a big part of the home game market. For whatever reason, however, they aren't. Which is a shame, because for all the fun it is to shoot things by twisting joysticks, it is even more fun to actually hold a plastic gun in hand and click away. Which is why, if you have a PS3, you should consider picking up ***Time Crisis 4.*** *TC* was the premier light gun franchise on the PS2; this is the first installment on the PS3, and in the basic

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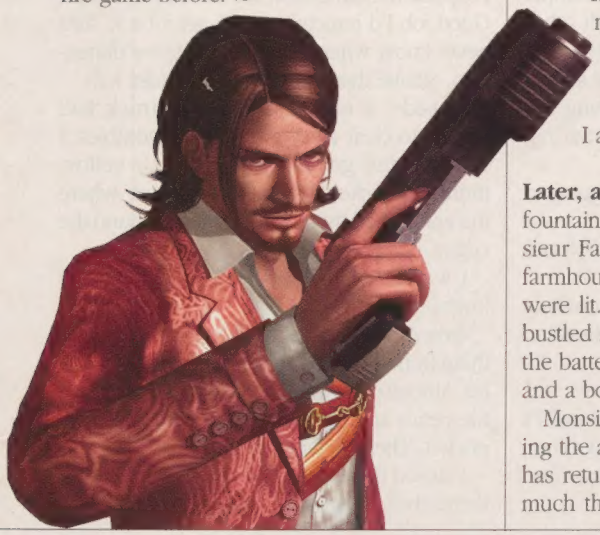
arcade game, not much has changed. The graphics are a little better and the character has some limited mobility around the screen, but basically *TC4* has the standard shoot-and-duck game play. There is a first-person shooter mode in *TC4*, but it isn't worth buying the game for. The point of view just moves too slowly, and once the screen is showing what the player needs, he still has to hit it with the gun. The arcade mode is simpler and more fun.

For the final game, it is back to RPGs, but ***Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom*** for the Xbox 360 from Blueside is different from the previous RPGs in this column because it is about killing lots of enemies at once. This is a staple of the *KUF* franchise which has typically pitted armies against each other and often had the player controlling a hero character right in the middle of the action. This incarnation of the franchise focuses on building up that single hero with more skills and more weapons and more upgrades while leaving the armies out of it. The result is a game that players can jump into even if they've never played a *KUF* fire game before. ❧



gift

Continued from page 45

Some part of me knew she wouldn't surface within a normal breath-holding span, that she was as comfortable under water as in the air—more comfortable, water being her native element. Another part of me, the part that believed in fairies only as metaphors for the multifarious facets of the human subconscious, prompted me to jump into the fountain after a drowning woman and pull her out. The tension between the two parts made the time of her absence seem interminable. But the moon hadn't moved when she returned.

I hardly recognized her. Her beauty, always exotic, had grown inhumanly strange, the relative proportions of her forehead and chin, eyes, mouth, and nose exaggerated and attenuated to the edge of caricature. Furthermore, she was distinctly green—skin, lips, eyes, and hair like duckweed floating on the surface of the water, luminescent in the moonlight. A star glittered in her brow—no decoration, but part of her skin, her skull, her very self.

"I had a bet with myself," she said, "whether you'd choose to run away or jump in the water after me or wait and see what happened."

"And did you win?" I asked stupidly.

"I'd have won no matter which you chose. You, on the other hand, might have lost a great deal."

"What—" I began, then prudently shut my mouth.

"Would you like your present now?"

It occurred to me that Ondine's gift might turn out to be something I'd be better off without. The gifts of fairies were traditionally uncomfortable, possibly troublesome. On the other hand, my life was hardly comfortable or trouble-free as it was.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I believe I would."

She brought her hands out of the water, cradling something bright and clear—a crescent moon. It wasn't the moon, of course—the moon was overhead, and just off the full—but it felt like the moon. I couldn't think what I was supposed to do with it.

"Kneel," she said, and I got down on my knees. She lifted the moon toward me, phosphorescent in the green cup of her palms.

"Eat," she said.

I ate.

Later, after moon-set, I walked past the fountain and down through the wood to Monsieur Fabre's vineyard. When I reached the farmhouse, it was near dawn. The windows were lit. Madame Fabre answered the door, bustled me into the kitchen, sat me down at the battered wooden table, and set a brioche and a bowl of café au lait in front of me.

Monsieur Fabre came in just as I was drinking the ambrosial last of the café. "The spirit has returned to the spring," he remarked in much the same voice he'd use to comment on the weather.

"She has," I said, equally matter-of-factly.

"Bien. It is better like that."

That's the end of it, really. Oh, there was a certain amount of drama attendant on Madame Ondine Collingsworth's sudden and mysterious disappearance, complete with weeping adolescents and a stoic husband and policemen tramping through the fountain and the woods, searching for signs of foul play. I got to know—and like—Peter Collingsworth a lot better than I ever would have believed possible. When the fuss had died down at last and the students had left, we sat with our wine on the veranda and talked about what was going to become of L'Ecole de la Source.

"She doesn't care," he told me on the night before I left. "She has what she wants. She'd been waiting to get back to her spring for ages—far longer than I knew her, certainly. It wasn't in her nature to feel about me as I felt about her. But we were happy together. We were happy for a long time."

He sighed, and we sat in silence until he went on: "I'll stay, of course. The spring needs someone to look after it, make sure it's not plowed under or built over or some such foolishness. That'll be easier if the school's a going concern. And she did care about the dancing."

"Keep the school going by all means," I said. "I suspect she cares about art as much as she cares about anything human, and she clearly likes having artists around."

"You'll come next summer? Teach art—figure drawing, that kind of thing. You can have the big room over the granary, if you like—use it as a studio."

"I'd rather have the bread oven."

And so it was settled.

My horrible abstract is hanging in my studio in Devon, just outside the toilet. I'm still working out what the gift was that Ondine gave me that night. Not a sudden perfection of line: I don't draw any better than I did before—not yet, anyway. I certainly draw more, and much more mindfully, than I did. Drawing has become an obsession with me, and walking on the moors with my sketching block and my little tin of watercolors. I've done dozens of trees and hundreds of rocks, many of them with faces peering out of or around them—little, cold, inhuman faces. Are they really there? I don't know. I only know I paint what I see—the truth, as Ondine bade me.

The other thing I've done is reproduce the watercolor of La Source. In the foreground, where duckweed and shadow had cast a woman-shape, I painted Ondine as I'd last seen her, star-browed, the crescent moon cradled in her palms echoing the curve of her mocking smile.

I showed it to my friend Sia, who turned and hugged me.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"For this," she said. "For painting something real." ❧

gurney

Continued from page 51

Speaking of lettering, Gurney invented an entire alphabet based on dinosaur footprints for *Dinotopia*. "The idea came from cuneiform writing. Early archaeologists mistook some of the marks on Assyrian clay tablets for bird footprints. It was a small leap to imagine dinosaurs writing with their footprints. I made a little rubber stamp out of an eraser to make the letters."

Gurney's dinosaur footprint alphabet is so popular with his readers that kids write him fan letters with it. There's just one problem: Gurney may have invented the language but he's far from fluent in it. "I have to painstakingly work my way through the words, letter by letter. Now I know what it's like to be illiterate."

Given Gurney's love of dinosaurs, it makes perfect sense that he'd covet one as a pet. And he has one: a blue parakeet that lives in his studio, the living descendant of ancient dinosaurs. The artist relishes the connection, saying, "Any creature with feathers—whether avian or saurian—is going to have a certain repertory of behaviors, including preening and posturing."

Gurney likes other old stuff as well. His fondness for Victorian technology pops up often in *Dinotopia* as, for example, a picturesque submarine, and quaint scientific instruments found on the shelves of the Imperial Academy in Chandara. "If there were a Fins and Rivets Club, I'd be a member of it," he says. "I have a great affection for the steam-driven technology of the Victorians."

So great is his love of things antique that he'll be taking along a quill pen and vintage Esterbrook gravity-fed inkwell on some of his travels to meet readers this year. "We all get tugged into the future with hi-tech," he says. "But I'm traveling boldly forward into the 19th century."

In addition to Gurney's personal slide show, "An Inconvenient Technique," other Gurney-generated art will be on the road as well, In *Dinotopia,* art imitates life, at least when it comes to the models that Gurney drafts for his reference photos. He recalls that when the Norman Rockwell Museum in Massachusetts hosted a *Dinotopia* art exhibit in 2006, a group of *Dinotopia* fans held a gathering and Gurney joined them. He then invited them to his nearby studio to become part of a painting, *Saurian Stairway*. They were asked to pose while imagining themselves standing near a Styracosaurus and Chasmosaurus. Some of the costumed figures in the final oil painting were based on the photos Gurney took that day.

Gurney's friends, neighbors, and family frequently pose for him, and many an affectionate portrait has made its way into the *Dinotopia* books. Two such portraits are of Gurney's mentors and friends, publishers Ian and Betty Ballantine, who urged him to "transcribe" the *Dinotopia* saga.

Even a dedicated transcriber can find his skills getting a bit stale. In 2003, Gurney took a break from all things dinosaurian to get some fresh air. "I felt I was getting rusty, so I took a year off to paint outdoors, in the Catskills where the Hudson River School painters worked." He returned refreshed. His recent paintings and illustrations bear the mark of increased confidence and a looser, more painterly approach that pays loving homage to many of the great Golden Age artists such as Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, William Bouguereau, Maxfield Parrish, and Howard Pyle.

Gurney gives props to other inspirations and disciplines in his work. For example, he gives a respectful—and playful—wag of his paintbrush to mathematicians Roger and Lionel Penrose—whose theories influenced artist M.C. Escher—with a Dinotopian take on Escher's famous perspective-puzzle paintings in the *Scholar's Stairway* at the "Pen and Rose" fraternity (pages 138-139, *Dinotopia: Journey to Chandara*). Gurney also has fun with the "Fibonacci Numbers" theory of mathematical ratios and how they affect symmetry in nature, offering a glimpse into the symmetrical "Fibonacci Gardens" in the far-flung city of Khasra (page 111).

"Dinotopia is a kitchen-sink world," Gurney says. "Whatever I'm interested in always finds its way into my alternate universe. I can take an excursion into philosophy or explore different cultural worldviews, since the castaways come from all corners and ages of our own world."

He excels at both landscape and detailed painting, enabling him to give the long and short views of the land and people. "The elaborate paintings, with all the research and with all the models, take several weeks or months to accomplish, and the smaller ones take from three days to a week. In all I had 150 paintings, so I had to work like the dickens to get it all done in four years."

Despite the time required, Gurney says there is certainly potential for more Dinotopia stories. "I have enjoyed working with other creative professionals on licensed novels and games, but I'm trying to limit that now so that I can concentrate on painting and writing. I'm trying to focus on writing and illustrating, which is what I love most."

Which, of course, means that he's going to stay focused on dinosaurs as well.

And of the many dinosaurs he's studied and painted, which one is his favorite?

"I like the Stegosaurus. It's such an unlikely looking creature. I could never have dreamed up one of those on my own." ❧

For more information, check out the artist's personal blog at gurneyjourney.blogspot.com, personal website at jamesgurney.com, and Dinotopia website, dinotopia.com.

girl

Continued from page 71

zeroes to be and bingo—you get Hebrew binary. All of which is irrelevant."

"It is?"

"Yeah. But the side-effect isn't."

"What side-effect?"

"All that recursion means a golem's code parchment is like one big hologram. Every piece holds all the information contained by the whole. So you can rip a parchment in half and still have two complete pieces of golem code. It's a fractal thing—don't ask me, ask Mandelbrot."

"So ... Nancy's running my code?"

"You got it."

"Doesn't mean we're engaged or anything," said Nancy. Then she fell, sobbing, into Byron's enormous clay arms.

• • •

They left hand in hand, like unmatched bookends. Without any books. I watched them disappear into the rain and tried to puzzle it out.

Did the shared code mean they were they brother and sister now? Soul mates? Clones? But Nancy still had her memories, her personality. And Byron had his. They hadn't changed.

Which made me think back to what Arachne had said about Nancy:

My needlework is good, but it cannot repair her soul.

So if I'd managed to fix Nancy up with golem code, that could only mean one thing: by opening up Byron's chest I hadn't got my hands on a scrap of parchment at all.

I'd got my hands on a soul.

Byron was right after all.

I spent a while scrubbing the stains on the floor. The silt washed out okay. The gore took longer. Neither went completely. I wondered if I should get a new carpet. But, like I said, that old carpet's got a lot of stories to tell. And it goes with the drapes.

I closed the trapdoor, fixed myself a coffee. I slipped the dimension-die back in my collar. Good job I'd remembered to get it back. You never know when you'll need a spare dimension. Shame there were only five sides left.

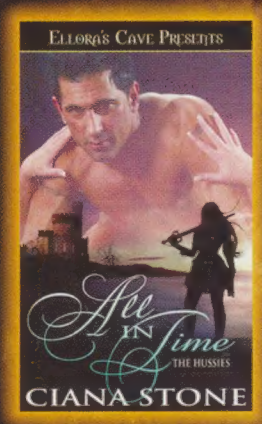
Outside, a municipal garbage truck had arrived to clear away the petrified zombies. I watched the golems work in their yellow municipal jackets. They trudged and, where the rain lashed them, they went soft round the edges.

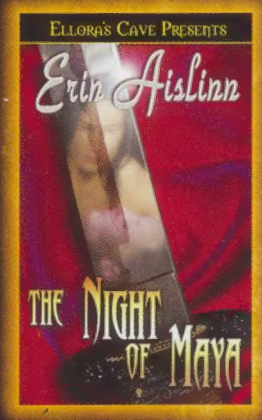
I wondered if I should tell them what I knew.

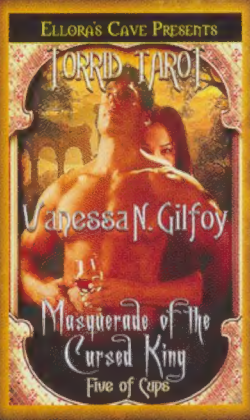
One of the golems bent to pick up something from the gutter. It was a flower from Pallas Athene's crown. The golem straightened the petals and tucked the flower in his jacket pocket. Then he went back to work.

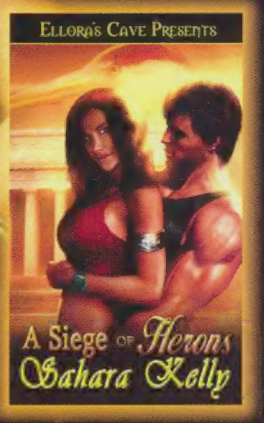
I closed the drapes. They'd figure it out for themselves, sooner or later. ❧

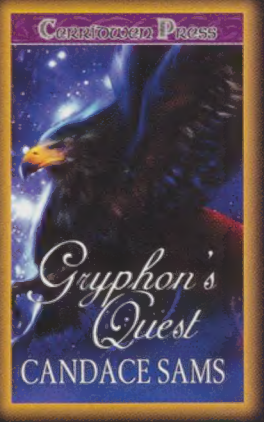
Ellora's Cave Presents

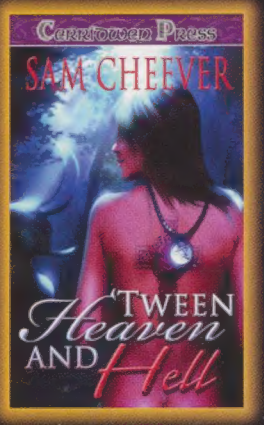












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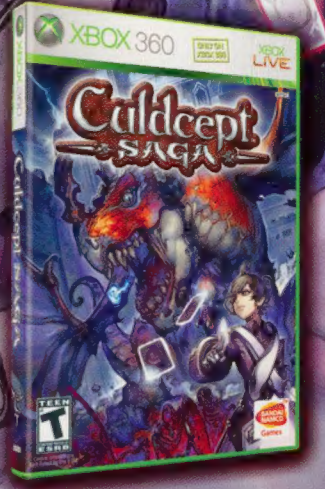

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